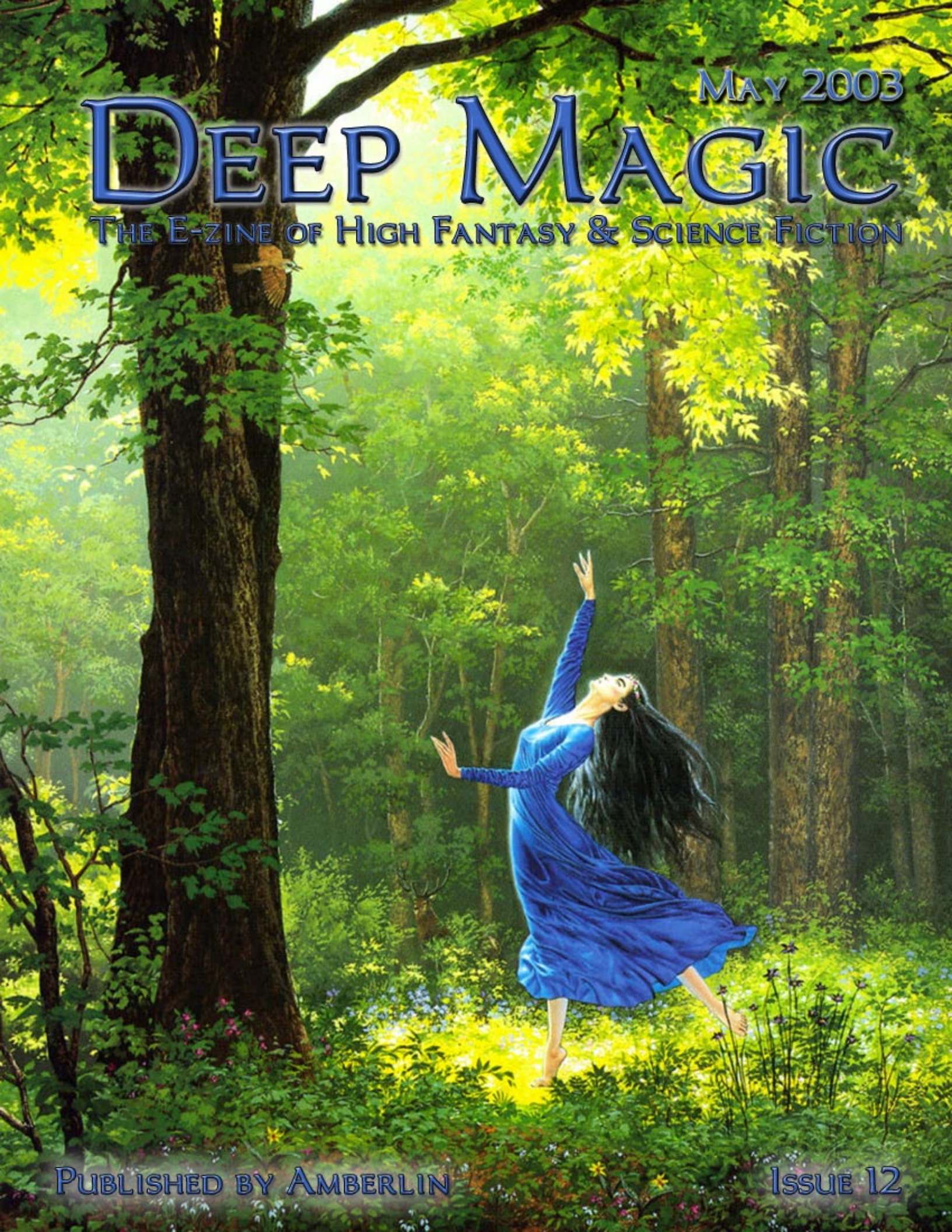
May 2003
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Table of Contents

Note From the Editors 3
Writing Challenge 4
Poll: The Best Fantasy Relic 11
Fantasy Short: *Wolf-Daughter's Whisper* 12
Feature Artist: Ted Nasmith 13
Article: "Said Bookisms," She Growled 16
SciFi Short: *A Taste of Earth* 20
Article: Being Part of a Strange Crowd 21
Fantasy Short: *Here Comes the Bride* 23
Author Interview: Jeff Wheeler 24
Fantasy Novel: *Tears of Minya* 26
SciFi Novel: *Procyx Book II* 27
Fantasy Novel: *Found Things* 28

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Note from the Editors

May 2003

Believe it or not, this issue marks our twelfth for Deep Magic. That's right. The end of our first year! So, be honest, did you think we'd make it this far? Well, we did, and do you want to know why? Just read Brendon Taylor's article, "Being Part of a Strange Crowd." It has the answer. We do this e-zine because we love the genre, we love working with the authors and artists, and we love interacting with you, our readers. Would we like to make money doing this? Of course we would. But we can promise that we won't be making money if our authors and artists aren't. We have plans in place to make this possible, to bring this e-zine to another level. We've been talking for a while about the publication of *Landmoor* by Jeff Wheeler. It's still on track, so watch for it. And watch for future novels to be published after.

In the meantime, we present the May 2003 issue of Deep Magic. We conclude two novels, *Procyx Book Two* and *Tears of Minya*, and continue a third, *Found Things*. In addition, three short stories grace our pages, electronically speaking. *Wolfdaughter's Whisper* and *Here Comes the Bride* give you a taste of fantasy, and *A Taste of Earth* is your scifi fix for the month (well, along with *Procyx*, of course). We hope you enjoy the selections.

As usual, we have more than just stories to offer. Any aspiring author should consider *"Said Bookisms" She Growled* by Margo Lerwill a required read. Don't argue with us on this one. Just read it. And as we mentioned before, be sure to read *Being Part of a Strange Crowd* by Brendon Taylor.

Our cover artist for the month is Ted Nasmith, an extremely talented artist who is heavily influenced by J.R.R. Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings*. Be sure to read his interview and take a look at some of his other pieces. They are amazing.

If we may, we'd like to make another plug for our Writing Challenge. Last month was a lot of fun, and the challenge this month should spark some interest. Put your writing to the test and send us your challenge submission by the 20th.

As always, Deep Magic has been a pleasure to present to you every month. If you enjoy what you read and want more, please drop a line on our message boards. We have recently revamped them, with many forums and topics to choose from. You don't have to register in order to post, so there's no excuse! We'd love to hear from you.

The Editors
DEEP MAGIC

Safe Places for Minds to Wander

Writing Challenge

Our April challenge was a lot of fun for the editors to review. The submissions inspired us to view many of our past covers in different ways. This was one of our better months for high quality submissions, so we selected five to share with you. This also gave us another chance to splash beautiful color onto our pages by revisiting the covers that inspired the stories. If you did not participate last month, scratch your writing itch by drafting and sending your submissions for our May challenge by the 20th to writingchallenge@deep-magic.net, and check next month to see if your words made it into print.

Appearances Can Be Deceiving by Jessica Ayers
Brethorn by J.T. Slayne
Curse of the Infidel by A.M. Stickel
Hunter's Clutch by Boyd Richardson
The Stations by David Adams

We also want to mention that writing challenge submissions are rarely edited by our staff. These submissions are exercises and not meant to be polished.

May 2003 Writing Challenge

Think about your childhood and try to recall someone whose memory, even now, has the power to invoke strong, often negative, feelings in you. Was that person the class bully, the clown, the daredevil, the town snob? Write down details of what you remember about that person: how she/he looked and talked; your encounters (if any) with this person; your observations of them at the time. Next, if you haven't seen this person for ten years or longer, imagine what she/he is doing now and where he/she lives. Be specific. Now, create a short story or scene with this person as a character and try to capture the "emotion" from that memory. Were you humiliated, infuriated, love-struck? Take the reader back to that traumatic time and relive the moment through the story in such a way so as to make your experience the reader's as well.

The purpose, of course, is to learn to identify events in your life that are still capable of making you laugh or cry. If you can capture these emotions and put them on paper, chances are you will also make your readers react. 500-800 words please, and put the story in a fantasy or sci-fi setting. Emotions are transferrable through the genres.

April 2003 Writing Challenge: Sometimes we come up with a writing challenge that really gets the creative juices flowing. Other times...not so much. We thought we'd go back to our first challenge and expand it a bit. We have been particularly proud of the cover art featured in Deep Magic. The images have been vibrant and thought-provoking. In that spirit, your challenge is to pick any cover art featured in Deep Magic and let it inspire you. Send us a narrative about that cover. Please identify the issue of the cover art that inspired you. Your submission can be a descriptive paragraph, a very short story, or a portion of a chapter from a novel you haven't written yet. You can give a background story about the picture, or describe what is soon to come. Just keep it under 750 words.

Appearances Can Be Deceiving

By Jessica Ayers

Daron spotted his quarry hundreds of feet below, a moving black speck on the snowy mountainside. As he stood up on his companion's back, the flier signaled Karaza to dive. The dragon spread her speckled wings and, in a matter of seconds, stooped to graze the top of the rider's head with the end of her snout, knocking the girl off her horse. At the same time, Daron leaped from Karaza's back into the snowdrift, tucking and rolling with practiced grace.

As he stood, the bounty hunter saw the girl scrambling to her feet a few yards away. She didn't look like much--scraggly black hair, green eyes flashing out of a scarred face, green wool shirt under inadequate leather tunic and leggings covering a scrawny frame. Her skin had already started to turn blue. The only thing about her that seemed worth retrieving was the jewel on the cord around her neck. In the reflected light from the snow, the gem seemed to sparkle with every color of the rainbow. Yet that jewel was apparently not what had someone paying an awful lot of money to get her back. His employers had not even mentioned it.

The fugitive looked at Daron blankly, making no attempt to escape. She just stood there as Daron bound her hands behind her. "I don't know what all you did to make yourself so valuable, Miss Birga, but someone wants you back yesterday, and that horse, too," he told her. Birga remained silent as he began to lead her down the mountain.

Daron was expecting the strong gust of wind behind them, but the girl was startled. She looked back to where the horse had been. Karaza had stooped again, this time lifting the hapless horse into the air with her hind claws. This impassioned Birga as nothing yet had. She began to fight against her bonds. Several moments passed before Daron had her under control. Above them, the poor mare struggled vainly as the dragon circled the mountain, climbing higher into the clouds. Eventually, the horse ceased its struggle and the dragon took off eastward. Daron's prisoner gasped with pain as her companion vanished in the distance; a tear froze on her check. Daron sympathized--he knew the bond between human and mount.

"Don't worry, she's likely just passed out," the man reassured the girl. "Karaza is very gentle with them. She can have the mare back in the city and return for us in a matter of hours. It's much faster this way." He didn't add that passing out might be the best thing for the horse. The few horses that stayed conscious during such a flight generally managed to slip out of their saddles and plunge to their deaths.

"Meanwhile, you and I are going to hike down to a cave I know of and wait for Karaza to return," Daron said. Birga just looked at him. The man shrugged and resumed leading his charge down the mountain.

They reached the cave without incident. Daron tied her lead rope to the wall of the cave, then he set about making camp. Birga watched him as he gathered wood. She watched him lay the sticks

down, watched him as he took his flint and steel and quickly ignited the tinder. Once the fire started, however, she watched it instead of him.

After a dinner of beef jerky, which Birga refused in silence, Daron checked her bonds. Birga's hands were tightly bound behind her, the lead rope tied to the wall. Daron now tied the girl's feet together, securing them with another rope to the same circlet in the wall. Finally, believing her secured, he slept.

The bounty hunter was awakened by a quiet hum. Birga was sitting cross-legged before the fire, humming, holding the jewel above the flames. Before Daron had time to wonder how she had escaped, the gem began to melt like ice, droplets falling into the fire to sizzle on the coals. Yet the stone was still whole. Daron sat mesmerized.

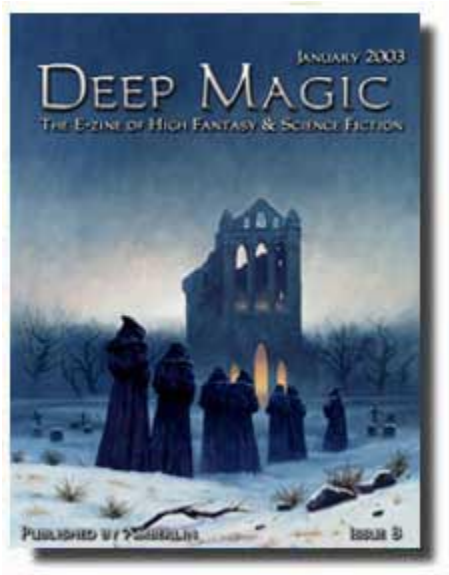
Suddenly, the mountain shook. Daron heard the familiar rumble of an avalanche and looked away from the stone towards the entrance of the cave. Ice and snow came pouring down across the opening like a cascade. When the tumult ceased, the entrance was completely blocked.

Daron turned back to Birga, who smiled and rose sinuously as her eyes flashed golden.

Funny, she didn't seem like that kind of girl, was his last thought for quite a while.

Brethorn

By J.T. Slayne



Snow caked the hem of Nasol's robes as he marched through the drifts. The rhythmic, crunching steps of six other men followed him through the maze of leaf-barren oaks. His heavy wool cowl kept out the bitter winter air, and his breath came in small bursts of white plumes as he labored ahead. He paused to rest, touching the frozen ridges of an oak and drew strength from its stunted, twisting limbs. What he saw through the trees ahead broke his heart.

Nasol continued his awkward pace through the snow and entered the clearing behind the ruins of the Sacerhoss. His heart clenched, and he thought he heard one of the men behind him gasp, another choke back tears. Tension thickened the air like the bad smell of a dying thing. Headstones were scattered haphazardly throughout the clearing, and swords had been driven through many of the burial heaps – a final affront to his dead brothers.

It sickened him. The devastation was complete. All that remained of the once-majestic Sacerhoss was the rear wall of the edifice. The glorious stained-glass windows had all been shattered and the fragments glittered in the snow. It looked like a skull with open sockets and grinning maw. A skull that had been crushed.

"It's over isn't it, Brother Nasol?"

The words flitted through the dawn air.

Nasol shook his head, listening as the cowl chafed against his ears.

"Do you think any of our brothers…lived?"

"No," Nasol answered, feeling with sharpness on his tongue but not using it. "No, I don't think any survived. The Brethorn are nothing if not thorough. Every book, every scrap of parchment

or cut of vellum has been burned. It's happened before, Brorther Ashok. It will happen again."

Silence.

Nasol started forward to close the distance. He wanted to touch that crumbling stone face, to see if any of its inner fire still burned, its defiance and determination.

The six followed him, crunching awkwardly through deep drifts, careful to skirt the burial mounds and the black-iron swords impaling them. The Brethorn – he wondered if any were hiding in the woods, that at any moment a stampede of hooves and blades would come circling around and start the work of death again. But Nasol believed his patience had won out in the end. Patience was the only thing that would save the rest of his brothers.

The rear steps of the Sacerhoss showed the cut and scuff of hooves, with frozen lumps of manure cluttering the porch. Another act of defilement. Nasol grit his teeth and stepped through the tall main arch, his boots crunching through the bits of glass and studs from the shattered windows. The huge wooden doors had succumbed to ashes.

The inner fane showed the remains of a book pyre smashed by tiles. What a pyre it must have been – massive as it burned, the flames high enough to set fire to the upper timbers of the roof. He kicked a shattered shingle and then turned to face the others. Only seven left in all. Such a small number to begin again.

He kept his voice soft so that it would not carry.

"The Brethorn have hacked down our brothers. They have burned our books and torched our Sacerhoss. They have defiled our rites and mocked our graves. But they cannot destroy our brotherhood. It will endure. It has always endured. They stamp on words and think their fires will destroy the pages. But they understand not that those words live in fire itself. The ideas behind those words cannot be cut or burned or purged. Even if they kill us, even if we are the last of the brotherhood, our Way will endure. The Brethorn do not understand us. They never have. When we rise again, we will seek out places amongst their rulers. Our whispers will guide their thoughts and thinking. Our rites will become their long-living traditions. They will worship those they destroyed because we will control the words they learn, the words they teach their children."

Nasol rolled up his arm and drew a curving dagger. "I am Keeper of the Great Secret. I am brother to all brothers. In life or death, I will serve this brotherhood. Until all men worship us."

The others rolled up their sleeves and drew their knives.

"Until all men worship us."

The piercing cry of a hawk split the air and Nasol smiled.

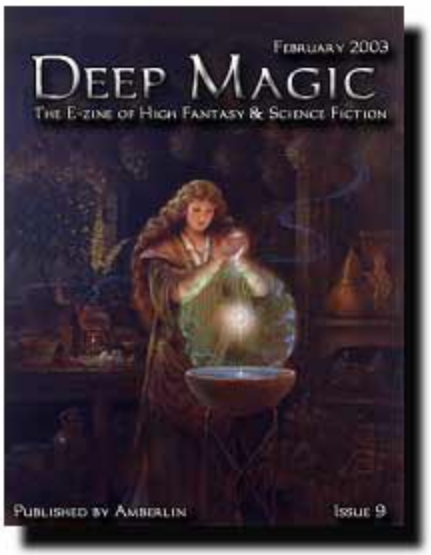
It began again.

Curse Of the Infidel

By A.M. Stickel

Yasmina bowed low before her Sultan, who had sent all his attendants away in order to meet with her privately. "What is your desire, Exalted One?"

Having lost her parents to the plague, the young sorceress wore the unbecoming brown robes of mourning. These did not in any way diminish the graceful beauty bequeathed her by her Circassian mother, the long waves of auburn hair and fair skin. Her astrologer father's dignified intelligence shone from her emerald eyes.



"We have been cursed by the infidel who dishonored you," said the Sultan, his eye lingering on the growing evidence that Yasmina was with child. "I'm sorry for the loss of your lovely mother and my faithful Astrologer, your father, Oman. Are you well? Is there anything my physicians can do to relieve you of your…ahem…burden?"

Yasmina blushed but stared in calm defiance at her ruler. "By the laws of my husband's country, after he took me, we became man and wife. His presence among us did not bring the plague. There was no need for you to execute him! Rather, I've discerned through deep magic that this plague derives from shallow reality."

"You know, Yasmina, that I can add your ashes to his, although I'd spare you the tortures your Dark Knight endured – may his name be forgotten – out of respect for your parents," thundered the Sultan, glaring at Yasmina. "Besides," he added, his expression softening to one of sly complicity, "I need your help to stop the plague. If you do, I may let you keep Oman's grandchild, instead of feeding it to my lions as soon as it's born. I could even make you one of my wives and adopt the child as my own."

"Although I appreciate your offer, since everyone knows you're a man of your word, and the father of many sons, I can solve your problem for but a small fee," replied Yasmina, enchanting incense wafting from her palms, her long eyelashes fluttering.

"If you're as like your father, Oman, as I suspect," said the Sultan, smoothing his mustache and admiring himself in the mirror polish of his marble walls, "what I think is a small price will turn out to be too high for me. But ask anyway. I'm feeling generous."

"Only send me the urns of infidel ashes you keep beside your bed, and I'll use them to end the plague. Then *you* may take credit as the savior of our people," said Yasmina.

"Hmmm," said the Sultan, "it's flattering that you've kept a magical eye on my bedchamber and gives me hope that you may yet join me there. I expected you to ask leave to go live among the infidels, or to at least beg for the life of your unborn child. Only promise me that, after I've given you those urns, once you've cured the plague and I've taken the credit, you'll come to my bedchamber in your finest attire and give me a single kiss – no more of these ugly mourning rags."

"Very well, Royal One," said Yasmina, smiling and bowing her way out, "I agree…only have your servants bring me the ashes this very night!"

"Your enthusiasm for ending our suffering is commendable," said the Sultan, clapping for his retainers and grinning in anticipation of his next meeting with Yasmina.

Yasmina went swiftly about her work. Once she had the ashes, she poured them into her moon pool where, reflected in crystal brightness, her beloved paused before leading his fellows into those magic lands beyond shallow reality. She entered the pool and went to him. As she did, the plague ended with one last victim. In his moonlit dreams, Yasmina bent over the Sultan in all her finery to bestow the fevered kiss of death.

Hunter's Clutch

By Boyd Richardson

"Wretched beast gets harder to find each year!" Gustalph watched his step as he left the dense vegetation of the forest south of Muttonburgh. Spring rains filled the creek with foamy wash and left the log bridge slippery with damp moss and mud. It had taken him nearly three weeks to find Hunter's nest this spring, and he had found it only by chance then. Gustalph shuddered as he reached the far side of the bridge and looked over his shoulder. He could not shake the feeling of being watched, hunted.

Perhaps it was her idea of a game, Gustalph considered. He hoped that was it. When he was a child, Gustalph remembered seeing the beautiful beast often. She would come into town like a stray dog, where she was rewarded with old meat from the butchery. She liked to play with the children. At first, everyone assumed she was male, and she was named "Hunter." By the time she had her first clutch of eggs, the name had stuck. When she got old enough to nest, she came less often, but still appeared. Back then, it was custom for the town to lure her from her nest with fresh lamb so that one man could invade the nest and remove the eggs. Her instincts started to prevail several years earlier and she began hiding her nest.

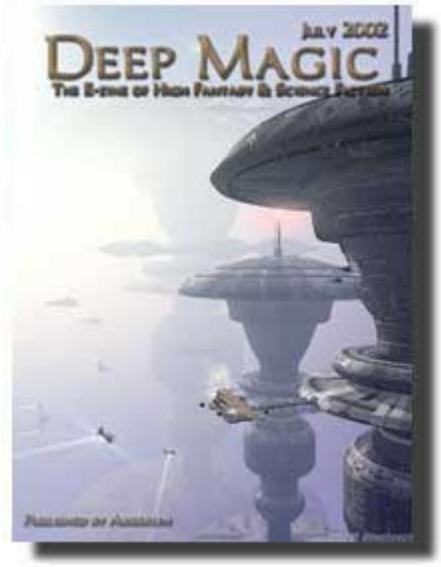
He was just happy to have the job behind him this spring. Now, he could return to his post in town and enjoy a warm bath. With her in the forest, the town's safety had needed little warding. As she grew, Muttonburgh's reputation grew too. Invading bandits not only faced the resistence of vigilant townsfolk, but a monster as well. Muttonburgh was the town protected by a dragon. Not only was it a safe place to live, but the novelty of its magical protector earned the town expansion and prosper.

Gustalph paused as he walked up the path toward town. Something had bothered him while he had been searching for Hunter's nest. More than the feeling of being watched. Years earlier, when she began to nest, townsfolk worried about other dragons. Hunter was loyal to them because they had raised her from a hatchling, but what about other, wild dragons? The forests had been thoroughly searched and no dragons found. The idea that a male dragon must be in the area because of the eggs was discounted. Dragons were different than birds. Perhaps the eggs were fertilized after they were laid, some speculated. Others wondered if any fertilization was needed at all. Still, Gustalph and men before him did not take the risk. All of Hunter's clutch was destroyed every spring.

The feeling of being watched persisted as he neared town, he turned one final time, hoping to see her beautiful gold and red crown. Nothing. Just the bland green forest. Gustalph shook his head and went to find that bath. His worries were behind him until next spring.

The Stations

By David Adams



Kevin stood at the window, gazing out at the stations littering the sky in front of him. His arms were folded across his chest, his lips curved to a frown. His eyes focused on a transport, docked at the middle port of the station next to him, and he wondered. How long would he be here? Maybe if he could sneak on to that transport, it would take him far from this place, this cesspool.

The gases were dense this day. He could barely make out the mother station, no more than 10 kilometers from where he stood. Kevin placed his hand on the shield in front of him and tested it, pushing slightly. *Maybe a small bomb*, he thought to himself. *I could end it right now.* He shook his head, clearing the madness from his mind. *There must be another way out of here.*

Starcrafts came into view from all angles, some entering the system with fresh crew and cargo, others leaving for better places. Yet Kevin remained. He knew he was stuck here for some time, a prisoner of circumstance, held against his will, and better judgement, hoping against all hope to be rid of this poisonous planet for good. Why the Federation chose this place was beyond Kevin's understanding. A distant planet, near nothing else resembling civilization, its atmosphere reeking of poisonous gases…it was a wonder anyone was here at all. But at the same time, he knew why. The stations were a mine of untold wealth, harnessing the gases for the most potent fuel ever created.

Someday, Kevin thought, it would come back against them. Someday a mistake would be made, and the fuel the Federation so desperately craved would destroy them all. Literally. He imagined what the explosion would look like. First one station, then another. Before long, then entire atmosphere of the planet would erupt in a fireball, fueled by its own gases, ignited by the selfish greed of humanity. Kevin knew it could happen. It was why he was here, to study the probability. The off-world explosion created a panic among the Federal delegates. The fuel, while potent, was also volatile and unstable. Some had grown careless, and the Starship that it fueled imploded, disintegrated in space in a matter of seconds. The containment cells were faulty.

So he was sent to this planet, the very source of the most dangerous substance ever created, to study the operation, to determine the likelihood of a wider disaster. Kevin spent two years in this prison, poring over schematics and calculations. It was as he suspected. The stations were safe, more or less. Carelessness could of course destroy the entire planet, but the operation was very well-run. No, Kevin discovered, there was only one way to bring it all down. It would have to be well-placed sabotage.

He didn't know how long he stood there, perhaps ten minutes. Maybe fifteen. He did it often, staring out at the field of stations, wondering. Wondering when his studies would be considered finished. Wondering when he could finally leave this place. Wondering why the transport was still docked to the station next to him, when it should have been gone minutes after its arrival. Wondering at the short burst of light he saw coming through the shields of the lower part of that station. Wondering, knowing, that he was right. Sabotage could indeed destroy the stations.

In seconds, the station that hung majestically beside his own was torn to pieces, and the explosion knocked him off his feet. He didn't have time to sit up before everything around his exploded in a poisonous fireball. He didn't even have time to scream.

Poll: The Best Fantasy Relic

In the fantasy and sci-fi genres, there is a motif that shows itself again and again -- a weapon or artifact of great power that becomes the core element of the plot. It could be Tolkien's 'One Ring to rule them all' or the Death Star from Star Wars. Focusing on just the fantasy genre for a moment, what is your favorite artifact of great power? The One Ring? The Sword of Shannara? I'm sure we missed a hundred of them, but take a pick for your favorite anyway.

What is the best fantasy relic of all time?

1. The One Ring To Rule Them All - Lord of the Rings
2. Sword of Shannara - Book of the same name
3. Black Cauldron - Book of the same name
4. Sorceror's Stone - Harry Potter
5. Callandor - Wheel of Time series (Rand's magic sword of glass)
6. Bhellium - David Eddings series (rose made of stone)
7. Excalibur - The sword that made Arthur a King

Results of the April 2003 Poll:

What kinds of stories do you most enjoy seeing in Deep Magic?

- Fantasy Short Stories
- Fantasy Novels
- Humor Short Stories
- Science Fiction Novels
- Science Fiction Short Stories

See the complete results and percentages here.

Go to the website and vote!

Our poll sponsored by csPoller. They provided us a great poll script, so please go to their site and check out their great scripts. They offer a wide selection of quality cgi-scripts, and their support is fantastic.

Wolf-Daughter's Whisper
By Peter Dahl

A short story set in the world of the Nord Aelt,
forming part of the history of the Winter's Darkness.

The shrouds of time were a darkness that haunted her. Keen as a thorn caught under her finger, the memories stung her heart, pried apart her sense of self, vanquishing her withering spirit. Yet someplace within her waning soul, once so irrepressible, there was enough purity left to shine above the pitch black of the past, steeling her to continue, rallying her one more time.

Despite the fading pain of history, a smile found its way onto her lips. It was a small thing, not of hope, but of irony. Looking back on a life of wondrous eternity, she knew she had very little time remaining.

Here she knelt, on the edge of the world known to her, between the mountains of the Nord and the Ost Alpen hanging over her shoulders like gods of the Nord Aelt, judge and executioner all at once. Her name clung to her thoughts: Lillepen. A whisper rose within her. She was daughter of Grenir and Germione.

It was a name she hated more than anything; perhaps the only thing she hated in all the Nord Aelt.

It had all begun with them.

The world had seen her parent's uncommon love fall into doom. Love between a mortal and immortal was always fraught with regret and sorrow. Long the melancholy seemed not to touch Grenir and Germione. For their time together, love had been strong, though it was never tested by the ravages of time. Her mother never had to see it grow old and weak and slide from the earth. But theirs was a love that bound them to despair nonetheless; the jealousy of another contorted and twisted it, shaping itself to the wrath and misery of the unrequited. Lillepen choked back the parching salt of her tears.

"Barath!"

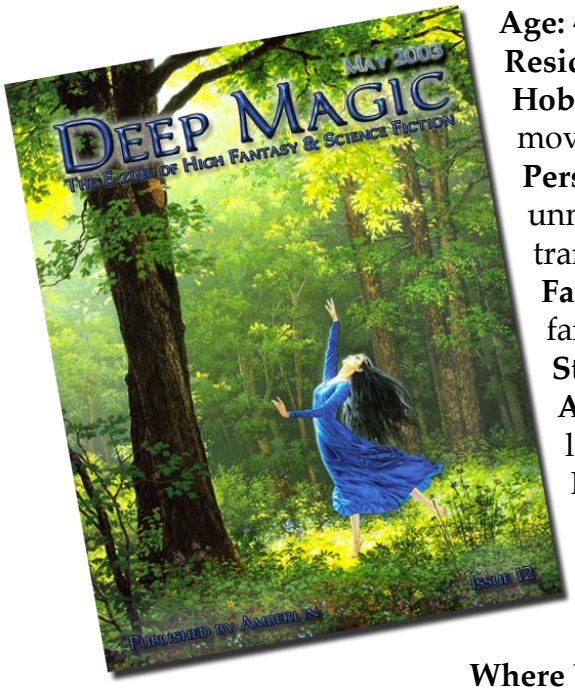
It was a name she hated more than anything; perhaps the only thing she hated in all the Nord Aelt. *Was that wrong?* An answer to the question she found in the tale of Barath itself, the man that had wrenched her parents asunder became crazed by his hatred, letting it rule him for its own sake, becoming the end in itself.

Barely noticed, a hand came into her vision.

Thousands of hands flashed to her mind, ten thousand mortal men and sprites holding their weapons and banners aloft, clutching shields and bows, saluting her in the iced rain as they marched up the narrow valley of the Alpentor. Would that the king Aelrich defeat the ancient evil that had endured with the sole purpose of consuming his line. The last mortal heir of Grenir, birthed to his second wife, Illis, after the death of Germione. Victory was unlikely. The Winter's Darkness, the fell gathering of wicked men and dark sprites that Barath called to him, had all the finality of the last storm.

Click here to continue on page 29

Feature Artist
Ted Nasmith



Age: 47
Residence: Markham
Hobbies: Songcraft & music making, reading, photography, movies and music,walking.
Personal Quote: Seek transcendance in all things. Struggle to unmask--not annihilate--your Shadows; it will illuminate and transform them.
Favorite Book or Author: Depends on the subject; Tolkien for fantasy, as you'd expect.
Started Painting In: Roughly 1969
Artist Most Inspired By: Frederick Church --for his sublime landscapes.
Mediums You Work In: Gouache.
Schools Attended: Northern Secondary School; Commercial Arts program.
OtherTraining: Apprenticeship with Visual Concept for architectural rendering, self taught.
Where Your Work Has Been Published or Displayed: Mainly published by HarperCollins, displayed at Chalk Farm Gallery; tednasmith.com; numerous websites devoted to Tolkien art.
Where Someone Can Buy Your Art or Contact You Professionally: www.tednasmith.com; info@chalk-farm-gallery.co.uk.

Q: How did you come to be an artist?
A: I've been drawing pictures all my life, but until I was directed to apply to the high school I went on to attend (see above), which was not in my immediate district, I hadn't assumed I'd go on to a career in illustration, as odd as that seems. I don't doubt that I'd have found my way toward it eventually, however.

Q: How would you describe your work?
A: I describe it as high realism, in general. But it is influenced--in the case of the Tolkien art--by a romantic sensibility that adopts the style of 18th and 19th century landscape and

neo-classical genres, as well as classic illustrators, to create what seems to me a very sympathetic look for depicting Tolkien's Middle-earth. Tolkien's world and stories inhabit an older world, long gone but yearned for, and my art seeks to reflect this visually. My other, more commercial, work simply reflects traditions of high realism in architectural renderings, science and automotive illustration.

Q: Where do you find your inspiration?
A: As you'd expect, I find a lot of it in other art, as mentioned, but also in an artist's typical love of nature in all its moods; in clouds and weather, sunsets, landscape, woods and fields, the stirring majesty of the terrible, beautiful world we find ourselves inhabiting. It is also found in the endlessly interesting phenomenon of human beauty, meant in its broadest context. Beauty is incredibly abundant, so often discovered in places we least think to seek and recognize it.

Q: What inspired this piece? (Luthien: Tell us its story...I mean besides Tolkien)
A: At the time the work was painted, I was only starting to appreciate Tolkien's masterpiece, *The Silmarillion*, and was interested in adding one or two Silmarillion paintings to the calendar I was currently illustrating. In the case of Luthien, I wanted to present her as Tolkien described her, "The most beautiful child of Iluvatar," but from a slight distance, since there is no way an artist can capture such a subjective description fully. My sense of Luthien has been that even in artists' depictions, she should remain mysterious and elusive (as she is for Beren at first), in order not to violate the spirit of the tale as one of a remote, legendary, long-ago mythic epic. In this and subsequent depictions, I try to adhere to an aesthetic of [at least] Western beauty in a woman and provide a 'template' through which the viewer may project his or her individual sense of her form. The direct quote that describes the scene comes from the poem 'The Lay of Leithien', not the shorter prose version.

Q: What do you consider your influences?
A: Besides the art alluded to above, I've had a meandering encounter with much non-fiction (and fiction) and read a range of books on many topics of interest to the student of life. I've also been influenced by mentors, an active struggle with Christianity and religion in general, and Jungian psychology. Like others, my mind filters the visual influences of contemporary and classic film where it bears on my ideas for Tolkien, as well as the wealth of photographic or illustrative reference in countless books on geography, history, zoology, war, mythology, and what have you, either as compiled in my studio library or as available through the public system. And I take photographs of my own, naturally.

Feature Artist: Ted Nasmith

Q: What has been your greatest success in your artistic career?
A: Personal success for me is measured ultimately in the appreciation I continue to receive from fans of Tolkien and my illustrations. Repeatedly, I've been complimented on how well my illustrations capture people's own mental impressions of Middle-earth and its scenes or characters. I attribute this in part to a certain ability to detach myself when doing Tolkien; from a personal sense of trying to discern what the painting wants to be rather than what my ego might suggest, and from a sense that a good illustrator tries to 'get inside the author's head' as best he/she can, without losing sight of the obvious subjectivity of, through a number of conscious decisions, methodically and skillfully creating a work of art according to the criteria in question.

In terms of professional success to date, I'd be hard pressed to decide whether it is the Illustrated Silmarillion or the current trilogy of LotR calendars. Both mean much and demonstrate my passion for Tolkien, allowing me to share my art with the world at large for posterity. If pressed, I'd say the LotR calendars have come along at a particular high point in my career and have provided a near perfect vehicle for someone who sees formal book illustration as a little constraining when compared to the relative 'carte blanche' I'm being given with calendar paintings, from the standpoint of shape and subject. And I've had less time constraint imposed with the calendar commissions, always a factor in the final results. But The Silmarillion is not a publication restricted to the short publication interval that calendars are, so for now it is the success with the longest 'shelf-life'.

Q: What trends are you seeing in the Sci-Fi/Fantasy genre?
A: In all honesty, I'm woefully unqualified to comment; I read relatively little fantasy per se, and will just as likely read a now-dated work as one of recent vintage. The same goes for Sci-fi; I've read lots of it, but I don't even attempt to keep up with trends, and my conference experiences are most often at those focussed on Tolkien or The Inklings. But since Sci-fi is generally myth-making as fictionally projected into an imagined future (or remote, technologically advanced past, such as Atlantis), and is, like all storytelling (especially Fantasy, Fairy Tale or Gothic Horror), about the psyche and the matter of Humanity and its predicament, it's safe to assume that no matter what "trends" come and go, it will always serve as a reflection and exploration of our times' major philosophical questions and fears.

"Said Bookisms," She Growled
By Margo Lerwill

Harlan Ellison saved my life.

All right, that might be a small exaggeration, but he did save me from a few needless rejections. To an aspiring writer, that feels about the same.

In 2002, the caustic, hilarious, legendary author of sci-fi and fantasy stood before a workshop full of attentive writers and asked for a show of hands from those who knew what a said bookism was. Four people (out of more than fifty) raised their hands, all of the professional, fulltime writers in the crowd. Point taken.

So what is a said bookism? Why do developing writers love them and editors hate them? Is there ever an appropriate time to use them, and if not, how does one excise them without leaving dialogue flat? Here are the answers I've compiled over the course of my quest to master the dread said bookism.

What Is A Said Bookism?

A said bookism, sometimes called simply a bookism, is *any* dialogue tag used in place of the word 'said.' For instance:

- "But I like said bookisms," she whined.
- "'Said' is so boring," he muttered.
- "Why can't I use said bookisms?" she asked.

So what is a said bookism? Why do developing writers love them and editors hate them?

Yes, technically, even 'asked' is a said bookism, though editors generally don't count that one.

Among the said bookisms quoted most commonly are demanded, declared, murmured, shouted, shrieked, exclaimed, inquired, queried, replied, implied, and whispered. Among the most famous said bookisms, guaranteed to make an editor cringe, are hissed, barked, frowned, laughed, sneered, and smirked.

What's Wrong With Using A Said Bookism?

The very thing that editors love about the word 'said' is the thing that makes some writers shun it. 'Said' is unremarkable, unadorned, *invisible*. It blends into the background, allowing the dialogue to dominate the sentence and the reader's eye to skip along unimpeded by the writer's clever turn of phrase.

Remember that the writer's job isn't to wow the reader with beautiful prose and punchy word choice. The writer's job is to tell a story so real that the reader lives it. The action, dialogue and internal dialogue are the stars of the show. The adverbs, adjectives and said bookisms are the special effects—too much and the reader either becomes jaded or pays more attention to them than to the story.

Some writers, however, fear that using the same word over and over to tag their dialogue will make their writing boring. Editors won't realize the command of language the writer has. Nuances of meaning will be lost. The reader will not stop and *feel* what an evocative choice the word 'hissed' or 'smirked' was.

Reread the first five words of the last sentence. *The reader will not stop*. Therein lies the beauty of the simple 'said.' Because said bookisms are not 'said', they are not invisible to the modern reader's eye. Said bookisms may cause the reader to pause or stumble over the writer's word choice. The last thing the writer wants is the reader stopping and stepping out of the story for *any* reason, even for a second. Each time you give the reader pause, you roll the dice and risk the chance that he or she won't feel like getting back into the story. If this is an editor, and the writer loses the bet, a rejection slip is forthcoming.

Said bookisms also make characters sound melodramatic. Heroes who vow, heroines who shriek and villains who sneer all their lines are too stereotypical and over-the-top to be taken seriously. The writer is better off conveying personality and emotion through stronger dialogue and good description of supporting action.

To boot, many said bookisms are physically impossible or just plain bad. For instance:

- "Leave me alone!" she hissed.
- "I don't want to," he smiled.
- "Why do you insist on pestering me?" she frowned.
- "You won't understand, but I'll explain," he pontificated.

Remember that no one can hiss a sentence containing no 's'. Neither can anyone smile, frown, laugh, sob, or smirk a sentence. They can speak while doing one of those things, but smiling or frowning does not result in speech. I have included 'pontificate' as an example of how distorted a writer's judgement can get in the desperate effort to avoid the word 'said.'

A Common Argument: "But George R.R. Martin . . ."

Before we look at the appropriate use of and alternatives to said bookisms, let's look at the inevitable argument in favor of them. Many successful authors use said bookisms to one degree or another. My favorite fantasy author, George R. R. Martin, uses them occasionally. However, I am not George R.R. Martin, and neither are most writing hopefuls out there. Professional authors with established audiences have already proven their talents for storytelling. When an editor sees a said bookism in one of his manuscripts, that editor is likely to fear that it is just the first of many, a sign of an amateurish disdain for 'said.' When a said bookism appears in the manuscript of an unpublished writer, that's one point off in the editor's mind. How many points off do you get before they put the manuscript down? That depends on the editor. Is it worth the risk to you?

When Is It Appropriate To Use A Said Bookism?

A said bookism does come in handy when the *manner* in which a character is speaking is not clear from what they are saying. For instance:

- "It's a pleasure to meet you," she said.
- "It's a pleasure to meet you," she lied.

• "It's a pleasure to meet you," she gushed.

However, said bookisms should be used as a rare treat. Try this exercise: get your favorite novel and find a page with lots of dialogue, then rewrite it to include said bookisms in place of every 'said.' Add a said bookism tag in two or three places with no dialogue tags at all. Now reread the page. Chances are, this sounds pretty stilted.

Many writers, myself included, would rather use an alternative to the said bookism. I do so because, to me, no said bookism is worth the risk of losing an editor's emotional involvement in the story and a chance at publication, and because the alternatives make for stronger, clearer writing. Thus, I rarely give in to said bookism temptation and indulge myself no more than once or twice per story or chapter.

What Are The Alternatives To Said Bookisms?

There are many fixes available to a writer who has discovered said bookisms riddling a first draft. Progressing from simple to tricky, they are: changing the bookism to 'said,' cutting the dialogue tag entirely, creating a new sentence using the tag, describing an action or scene in a way that expresses the emotion of the tag, and strengthening the dialogue so it stands on its own. Here are several examples using each alternative in turn and some familiar quotes:

• "You, too, Brutus?" Caesar wept.
• "You, too, Brutus?" Caesar said.
• "You, too, Brutus?"
• Caesar wept. "You, too, Brutus?"
• Caesar grasped at his torn robes with one hand, at his friend's shoulder with the other. His touch was gentle, even fatherly. "You, too, Brutus?"
• "Brutus, most . . . faithful friend . . . , even you have joined them in betrayal?"

• "Money-changers in my Father's house!" Jesus raged.
• "Money-changers in my Father's house!" Jesus said.
• "Money-changers in my Father's house!"
• Jesus flushed with rage. "Money-changers in my Father's house!"
• Jesus hurled the coin-laden tables down the temple steps. "Money-changers in my Father's house!"
• "Money-changers in this holy place? How dare you turn my Father's house into a den of thieves!"

• "Let them eat cake," Marie laughed.
• "Let them eat cake," Marie said.
• "Let them eat cake."
• Marie laughed. "Let them eat cake."
• Marie waved the issue away with the flourish of one silken sleeve. "Let them eat cake," she said and laughed.
• "No bread in the markets for the poor? Let them eat cake."

What Alternatives Should A Writer Avoid?

First, avoid using any one alternative to said bookisms to the exclusion of the others. This can become as tedious and distracting as the bookisms themselves.

Secondly, avoid turning said bookisms into adverbial dialogue tags. For instance:

- Said Bookism: "You think you know everything!" he barked.
- Adverbial Tag: "You think you know everything!" he said angrily.
- Alternative: He shoved the books across the table so hard they clattered off the other end. "You think you know everything!"

A Little Of This, A Little Of That

Varied sentences that show rather than tell are the ultimate aim of a writer honing their craft. Don't tell the reader that the villain barked or spoke angrily; show the reader what angry means. Let the reader hear the emotion in the hero's words instead of the author's. In practice, a writer can employ all of the techniques discussed here, singly or in combination, to build vivid dialogue and scenes that call attention to story and character rather than word choice.

The End

A Taste of Earth
By Darrell Newton

"The sky is not a painting, it's a movie. Stars pulse, flare, and dim when least expected. Some even explode as supernova. Nearer and dearer to us, asteroids and comets streak across the sky, at times uncomfortably close to the Earth."
~ Thomas McGlynn, NASA
(National Aeronautics and Space Administration)

NASA established Near Earth Asteroid Tracking (NEAT) in an effort to develop a system capable of detecting the most near earth objects larger than one kilometer, the most dangerous asteroids, capable of a global disaster.

Palomar Observatory, San Diego County, California

"Eight minutes to impact." Astrophysicist Mark Clemens read the data on his monitor with three other NEAT team members huddled around him. They watched the telemetry of four nuclear missiles headed for the meteor. Mark savored the electrifying excitement of the moment, a sense that lingered even after forty-eight hours of sleepless anticipation. With wordless agreement, the team had taken on a disheveled, haggard, and unshaven appearance – their new uniform. Caffeine coursed through their veins, and adrenaline gave them sustenance. Frayed nerves had already sparked two petty arguments, but it didn't matter.

Wouldn't it be considered a natural event ... an event that regenerates evolution? . . . It's needed to periodically clean house.

"Come on, Hachiman," he said with a smirk. "Stay real still. Daddy's got a present for you." They had given the meteor an official catalogue designation of 2007 UX25, but no one called it that any more. The amateur Japanese astronomer who discovered it named it Hachiman after the Shinto religion's god of war and patron god of the samurai. Mark thought it was fitting, since it threatened death and destruction if they couldn't change its course.

Camera engineer David Rhodes slapped him on the back. "Well, after ten years of observation and extensive cataloging, thanks to yours truly," he stepped back and gave a deep bow with a flourish, "we have hunted Hachiman and sent him back to Hades."

"Hades is Greek, you ignoramus," said Aaron Cohen. "Besides, Hachiman's not dead, yet."

"Yes," David agreed, "and we're not trying to kill him either, just nudge him."

David's insistence on personifying the asteroid had twice before irritated everyone in the group enough to erupt into a minor squabble. Mark could understand personifying pets, since they already had gender, or even ships, since they have enough moving parts to give them a personality, but a rock?

David continued, "I wanted to get a closer look at him before we send him off to the

Click here to continue on page 34

Being Part of a Strange Crowd
By Brendon Taylor

When I was a child, my mother would drag me from one used bookstore to another, ignoring my nags and complaints while searching the used paperback romance aisles. Needless to say, I hated it. I am certain she would have preferred to leave me at home, but I was too small. After what seemed like a death row sentence, she would take her armful of books to the counter and pay for them.

Years later, I discovered fantasy and science fiction. Maybe twelve years ago, I was devouring every Terry Brooks and David Eddings book I could get my hands on. I was interested in collecting their complete works in hardback, but being in college, I could not afford to pay retail. I remembered the used bookstores I had so loathed.

I was surprised to discover that most of those stores had a special policy for purchasing fantasy and science fiction books. I could only buy the hardbacks if I traded another fantasy/science fiction hardback in return. The clerk, not a fantasy reader, complained that fans of the genre clung onto their books and collected them. Without the special rule, the store just could not keep stock on the shelves. The used bookstores that did not have the special rule validated the rule. They rarely had much of a selection.

I saved money from my part time job waiting tables and bought each hardback new.

Those books, which now include the complete Wheel of Time series (well, the ten books written thus far), *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Hobbit*, and a handful of other fantasy classics, rest on the shelves of my front room bookcase. Friends and family who come by for a visit often see the books and remark how much they enjoy one author or another. They often leave my home with one or more books in hand.

All three couples lamented that Robert Jordan takes so long to put out each Wheel of Time novel...

That is my wife's influence on me. Before I met Rochelle, I enjoyed discussing the books and authors that inspired or moved me with a small handful of friends. Now, I enjoy introducing people to my favorite authors and I will even smile as one of my prized hardbacks leaves my home. The reward comes when the friend returns the book. Not only am I happy to see the book back in its place on the shelf, but then I get to discuss the book with someone who, more often than not, has also become a fan of the story.

Recently, my wife and I went out for a night on the town. First, we attended a banquet dinner sponsored by a professional organization for which I had performed a service. We socialized for just as long as we thought courteous, and then snuck out a little early to go to our favorite bookstore. We had a $10 certificate from Barnes & Noble for using their credit card. My wife and I use that specific credit card to buy gas and groceries just so we can get those $10 certificates every month or so. They invariably get spent in the fantasy/science fiction section.

While we were in the store, two other couples about our age were also spending their Friday night in the fantasy aisle. My wife was looking for a new book by Mercedes Lackey when one of the men standing next to us asked, "Is that series any good?"

So it started.

Over the next hour we discussed the various authors we have enjoyed. All three couples lamented that Robert Jordan takes so long to put out each Wheel of Time novel, and how he introduces new storyline threads without resolving old ones. One of the men recommended that I read *The Last of the Renshai* by Mickey Zucker Reichert, telling me that the author does a nice job tying a new fantasy story into traditional Norse mythos. After the time I spent writing *Mortal Amusement* for the September Issue, those words were magic to my ears. I purchased the book on his recommendation. Now I have about ten books on the shelf at home already waiting to be read, but hey, there is plenty of room for one more. This new friend recommended another trilogy that, if Barnes & Noble had in stock, I would have purchased.

In return, my wife and I assured our new friends that Terry Brooks' Voyage of the Jerle Shannara trilogy was a bit of a rehash of the former Shannara series, but well worth the read. We also recommended Robin Hobb, who our friend had read before but had lost track of her new series. In all, we discussed quite a few books we enjoyed that our new friend had not read. I think between us there were few books on the shelf that one or another of us had not read.

In the end, Rochelle and I checked out with enough books that our $10 certificate was only a token towards the final tally. Yet we smiled when we saw our new friends leave the store with a stack of books 2-3 times as high as our own. In his stack were many of the books we had recommended.

The point is, I am not a particularly outgoing person. I am generally friendly, but I rarely strike up a conversation with a stranger at a grocery store. There is something special about the fantasy and science fiction genres and its fans. I think we are generally happy to share the joys we have found in the genre with others.

One reason I believe this to be true, why these genres create such a collegial atmosphere in the bookstore and on the internet, is because so many fans and authors are genuinely good people. At Deep Magic, I am consistently impressed with those who willingly volunteer their time and talents. In our first issue, Robin Hobb consented to our invitation to write an article and submit to an interview. She did this without promise of pay. Incidentally, none of our owners or editors are related to or have any other non-professional relationship with her. We consistently receive permitted use of the best fantasy and science fiction art on the market. Many of those artists also take the time out of their schedule to submit to our interview.

Our editors volunteer their time as well. They come from all over the world, from several continents and time zones. We have become friends through this work, without even seeing each other face-to-face. None of us have collected a dime for the work we have put into Deep Magic, and to my knowledge none of us regret it.

I will share one last story about Robin Hobb that illustrates the goodness of people you will find in this genre. In January of this year, I visited Robin Hobb's website and discovered that she offered personalized inserts for her books. I requested one for a copy of *The Golden Fool* that I had purchased for my wife's birthday. I expressed my gratitude for her article and interview for Deep Magic. Not only did Rochelle get the personalized insert, but she also received a hand-written birthday card from Robin Hobb. Believe me, I got plenty of brownie points. Rochelle immediately called her sister, who happened to have the book on loan, and shared her excitement about receiving the card and the insert.

I am happy to be part of Deep Magic, to work on the ezine with friends who share my love for the genre. We are part of a strange crowd. I plan to continue to enjoy and build friendships within the genre. I will continue to share my books and recommend good works to others. I find that open, sharing atmosphere is strong at Deep Magic, and I hope you do too.

The End

Here Comes the Bride
By Rabia Gale

The air was hot and heavy that August evening. The large drawing room was filled with the yellow glare of electric lights; every inch of floor space was covered with female bodies. The younger women sat cross-legged on the Afghani carpet, singing lustily. One beat the time on a percussion instrument, the light glinting off her silver bangles. Older women sat on plump couches, talking amongst themselves, glancing at the bride-to-be who sat demurely, hands folded in her lap, head bowed, her *dupatta* concealing most of her face.

"Ai-ee, he's a very handsome young man. And a doctor, too," said an unmarried aunt who had lived with the bride's family for years. "She is very blessed."

The other women agreed, nodding their heads. "Yes," said one matron. "It's been a while coming, but it is all in Allah's timing." She clasped her hands over an expansive bosom, chastely covered with folds of silk, and rolled her eyes heavenwards.

There were murmurs of assent. "Her parents are very pleased," said the aunt complacently. "Such a *nice* boy, such a decent family…Not like the one Chikki almost married." Her voice dropped dramatically, and the others leaned forward to listen to this scintillating piece of gossip.

The voice was in her head, but it wasn't hers. Alia's head jerked towards the wardrobe, but there were too many people in the way. She opened her mouth to order them out of her way...

Around them the younger women still sang, this time a song about yellow clothes and green bangles. Some of the more zealous ones cleared a small space and started to dance to the claps and cheers of the others. Light shone off made-up faces, the odour of sweat and perfume and henna rose up into the air, female voices created a din – it all swirled around the bride-to-be, sitting still and silent amidst the celebration on the eve of her wedding.

* * *

Alia stood, eyes closed, face lifted up to the cold blast from the air conditioner. She breathed in great gulps of air, feeling it slip into her lungs in a wave that smelled and tasted slightly metallic, and letting it out again. In and out. Just breathing, not thinking. It was mercifully cool and dark – she thrust out of her mind last night's memories of bright glare and stifling heat.

She was supposed to be resting with cucumber slices over her eyes and had been left strictly alone to do just that. But even in her hushed bedroom, with the curtains closed against the harsh afternoon sun, she felt the noise and busy-ness down below as chairs and tables and decorations were brought in and set up for her wedding. It was only this close to the dull roar of the air conditioner that she could block out her awareness of the preparations as people milled about down below.

Alia sighed and moved away from the air conditioner, stepping around two conspicuously

Click here to continue on page 39

Author Interview
Jeff Wheeler

Age: 32
Residence: Rocklin, CA
Marital Status: Married
Children: 1 daughter, 1 son
Hobbies: publishing Deep Magic, reading, and martial arts
Favorite Book or Author: Elfstones of Shannara by Terry Brooks

Professional and Educational Information

Authors Most Inspired By: Terry Brooks, Sharon Kay Penman, Lloyd Alexander, J.K. Rowling
Educational/Training Background:
Schools Attended: San Jose State University
Degrees: Masters Degree—Medieval History (1997), MBA (2001)
Published works (fiction/non-fiction/obituaries): Landmoor (coming soon), The Wishing Lantern (hardcover children's story), "Murder in History 151" (historical essay), various entries in the Historical Dictionary of Late Medieval England, 1272-1485, Deep Magic.
Website: http://www.jeff-wheeler.com/ (my new "official" website)

Tell us about the origin of your novel, Tears of Minya? How did you come up with the story? What was the process and development that transformed that idea into a complete novel (trilogy, series, etc.)?
I started Tears of Minya in February of 1997. It is a story that I imagined while working on my master's thesis on medieval sanctuary practices. In fact, I even remember the trigger that started this story writing itself. I had a copy of a Latin manuscript written by the abbots of Westminster Abbey during the 12th and 13th centuries. There was a specific line in that document that jumped out at me and gave me the plot of a multi-book story. I then enlisted the help of several friends and wrote the entire first draft by e-mail, letting these friends decide the actions of Jaylin and Gabe while I nudged the raft along the plot current. This provided the skeleton for the first four books. As you can see, there is much more to tell in this story.

Do you have any favorite characters?
This is a tough question for any author to answer. And especially with this series because you have not met many of the characters yet. I really like Jevin Tousann, the prince. He plays a stronger role in the following books (and we get to see him from Jaylin's point of view more often). I like Jevin's niece, Princess Keyana, very much as well. Her name is mentioned only once or twice in this first book Tears of Minya, but she plays a definitive role as the major plot unfolds. I like Thasos – he's a favorite as well. I like how his loyalty to Jaylin and to the Queen continues to get tried as the political

events in Minya are enflamed by Alvaron's fall. Sometimes it's the characters you don't see right away that can become your favorites. Watch for more of Ritasker, the infamous thief of the Tier of Aster. He was a lot of fun to write.

What have you been reading lately?
Just finished Greg Keyes' The Briar King. I really enjoyed it. The characters are well done and the setting it superb. I started next on Terry Brooks' writing memoirs Sometimes the Magic Works - an excellent book for writers. It has resonated with me very strongly as an author and confirms some of my suspicions than writing is a legal addiction. The man can't help himself either.

Can you give us a peek at what else is up your sleeve?
I have sequels aplenty. Currently, I am spending my weekends writing Silverkin, the sequel to Landmoor. I have written 24 chapters right now and guess that it will be about as long as Landmoor. I'm pushing to finish it so that we can publish it in December or January. It will not be serialized in Deep Magic first. It's been a pleasure to work on and the story keeps writing itself.

I also have another first book in a series that I need to get back to. I started Kingmakers while studying history at San Jose State University. It came as the result of a question – what would have happened if Henry V (the victor of the battle of Agincourt) had lived long enough to face Joan of Arc on the battlefields of France? With a fantasy twist. The story is told from two points of view, separated by 500 years. It is told through the eyes of a medieval history student who is specializing on the life of a controversial and infamous battlefield commander. The other point of view is the young nobleman who becomes the greatest battlefield commander of all time and the chaos his victory causes. Studying our own world's history often reads like a fantasy novel. I thought I would try it the other way around.

What is next in the world of Minya? Where does the story go from here?
When I finish writing Silverkin, I plan to write the sequel to Tears of Minya, a novel I have tentatively titled Wrath of Aster. It picks up only a few months after the conclusion of Tears of Minya and delves into the ramifications of Alvaron's exile into sanctuary. Jaylin is given a new assignment by Prince Jevin to investigate a possible revolt by the leader of the Gypsy Kings. Jevin's army crushed their previous revolt several years before (some of you might remember that Thasos mentioned this event). Trouble is brewing again as factions within Minya take advantage of the political turmoil throughout the Tiers. Is Lady Minya behind it all?

Where can readers keep track of your writing projects and be notified of your new publications or developments?
I've put together an "official" website so that readers can follow my work separately from Deep Magic. I don't really know how many readers have been following my novels or articles, so I have created my own subscription list to send out updates – I promise I won't flood anyone's inbox with e-mail. But the folks on my e-mail list will be the first to know when Landmoor is published.

URL: http://www.jeff-wheeler.com/

continued from Issue 11

TEARS OF MINYA

By Jeff Wheeler

CHAPTER SIXTEEN
Runner's Bridge

Jaylin hid Kalisha's letter in the secret pouch in the fold of his boot. He felt the folded bulk against his leg. After shaving, he combed his hair in a different style and settled the blue hat across his head. If he could have flown like a bird to the Tier of Premye, he would have. He thought it safer to go straight to the Bright Well, though. It was closer, and he would be able to get Jevin a message. Grabbing his cloak from a peg on the wall and a fresh honeyed wafer from the kitchens, he left the inn and started across the Tier of Aster.

The morning sunlight painted the rutted and cracked streets in hues of orange and gold as he passed the opening pavilions and handcart stalls and joined the first crowds of the day. Roads were well marked, but it still took most of the day to traverse the Tier and find Runner's Bridge. Watching from beneath the rim of his hat, he experienced a nervous anxiety as if everyone was staring at him. He glanced behind often, making sure no one was following.

His anxiety grew as he approached Runner's Bridge – the gateway back to the other side of the Semn. What or who would be waiting for him there? He wasn't sure how he was going to make it across three Tiers, find Thasos and Jevin, then bring the Mark to his knees before the King's Will. *Just one at a time*, he told himself. The first thing to worry about was leaving Aster alive.

"I must be mad," he whispered, staring at the surging water. He stepped back and started running toward the edge to jump into the river.

It was late afternoon when Jaylin arrived, and the crowds were already beginning to thin out. He turned in his pass to the Nasturtium and thanked them for the stay. They asked if he had any coins to exchange, but he shook his head, deciding to keep the few dyx with Aster's mint for when he returned. He knew he would, of course. Knowing one of Radamistus' headsman would be to his advantage later. It was a secret he planned to keep to himself.

After passing through the tall gate, he crossed into the jurisdiction of the legion sheriffs. The bridge rose before him, and he could just see the walls of the Tier of Median on the other side.

A sheriff halted him. "Let's see your shoulder."

Jaylin shrugged and rolled up his sleeve, without saying a word. The sheriff inspected his arm and saw the brand. "Here's another one," he said with contempt. "What's your business outside of Aster, sir?"

Jaylin met their gazes. "I am carrying a message to the King's Will. Stand aside."

"To the King's Will? I don't think a cheap moth like you has any business at the King's Will."

Jaylin went through his pockets and withdrew Jevin's note. It bore the Prince's seal and gave him free rights through the Tiers. He hadn't needed to use it since Jonas Broan had brought it to the Bright Well.

"Perhaps this will persuade you. If you can read."

The sheriff snarled and grabbed the note. He studied it for a moment, and then his eyes went wide. "How

Click here to continue on page 46

continued from Issue 11

Procyx Book Two
The Works of Men

Chapter Five
Secrets of the Dawn Era

The Lady Portia sat perfectly still, bristling at Collins' gaze resting anxiously on her face. Then she flushed and fidgeted, her hand at her lips. Nearly a minute passed until Collins could restrain himself no further.

"Well? What do you think?"

She put down the outline for his press release about the Coss artifacts, looked up nervously, but managed to answer him with a smoothness that surprised even her. "I assume you know what you're doing?"

Collins laughed and took a deep drag on his pipe. He obviously relished its perfection, for he sat with closed eyes and just the hint of a smile, holding the smoke within his lungs--and holding it.

"I think this whole Mhyrn business is frightening." The Lady Portia stood, walking over to the window. A well-established dusk enshrined the glowing, emerald temple. The moon hung above it, as if captured in the gossamer webs of The Eye's accretion nebulae. She tried to conceal a shivering which deepened the dark heaviness she now seemed to carry with her all the time--a heaviness that was as excruciatingly empty as the communion she had shared with Polyphemus had been rich in the bright days her youth. She turned and, taking a glass of strong wine, downed it in a single run of swallows. This was her third, and even the fuzziness of the alcohol could not blunt the darkness that lived inside her.

There, lying on the floor, not more than a few meters away, was the Coss stone. But they had not brought it out with them.

"These are bizarre--awful times," she said, steadying herself against dizziness that derived from her alcohol level. She laughed sardonically, for all the wine accomplished was to make her dizzy. Her darkness deepened further. Suddenly furious, she clutched the empty glass and hurled it across the room. The walls sensed the flying crystal goblet, slowed its momentum until it hovered mere centimeters away then let it descend gently to the floor. A moment later, a small service bott retrieved it and brought it back to her.

"Get away from me," she yelled hoarsely at the machine. It quietly put the glass on the bar and withdrew. "Can't even break an fuming glass!" she hissed, moving to a contourmorph and falling into it.

"What the Gates is gnawing at *you*!?" Collins stared at her as if she had three heads. "Grief, woman--I thought you, of all people, would be *delighted* by this."

"I just . . ."

Collins cut her off. "I thought you wanted this Reeber boor out of the way. Think of it! I know something about the Mhyrn artifacts *he doesn't!*" His eyes narrowed. "You *do* still want him out of

Click here to continue on page 86

continued from Issue 11

Found Things
By M. Thomas

Author's Note: My heartfelt thanks to two special readers. Mark Reeder, without whose eloquent praise I might not have kept some of my best passages. And especially to the selfless devotion of my good friend, Steven McCrary, without whom it might not have all fit together.

This is for Steven, my first reader.

Chapter 4

Ivy the baker came to see them early the next morning. Missing rose early, unable to sleep well. Roger crept in through the front door, then stood there awkwardly until Missing mumbled a sleepy and not quite charitable good morning. They began negotiating around each other in an attempt to make up a breakfast. There had not been much conversation after Mister Croomb's departure the evening before, and there didn't seem to be much use for any now. They were mostly trying not to get in one another's way, using the careful propriety of the newly introduced and not yet firmly allied.

She was of the sort quite proud to say at the end of their life they have had nothing to do with men or the nonsense such acquaintances lead to.

"Sorry, I'm in your way again, I know."

"Yes, well I just need–"

"Cheese? Bread? Eggs? I'll get it just tell me–"

"No, no I'll get it."

"Here let me–oh, jumped right out of my hand, sorry."

"That's all right Roger. I'll clean it up."

While wiping up the suicidal egg, Missing was surprised by Ivy's voice in the front hall. She had never seen Ivy outside the Shunts. In the back of her mind she had always had the vague notion that leaving the Shunts would cause the baker to disappear, like some smoke of imagination.

"Morning, Ora." Ivy was the only person brave enough to call her aunt by a nick-name.

"Ivy? This is a surprise."

"Well, with all the balloo yesterday and her time in jail, Missing forgot to pick up your remedy. I've brought that, and a fresh loaf."

"My goodness. That's kind of you Ivy, but isn't that one of your special breads? I hardly think

Click here to continue on page 132

Continued from page 12

"Lady Lillepen," Rekke Red Mantle offered his tiny hand again. "Come, we'd best move on… Uthe's not far from us."

"No, kobold, I'll not run when what is left of the world stands to fight."

Rekke Red Mantle's beard poked out from under the hood of his resplendent red mantle in thin wisps, like the straggled whiskers of a wet cat. "This is madness, Mistress! We'll be lost."

Lillepen looked at the sprite, still with all the power of a daughter of a mortal crown. Though she was on her knee, she did not have to raise the yellow sprite-eyes of her mother. The kobold only reached her shoulder. "You will protect me against the Black Lass as you have been bound by oath. The huntress of the Winter Prince shall not deter me, and I will do what I must!"

The image of the Queen of Night Mares brought bitterness. Her own beloved had fallen to the machinations of Uthe, the Black Lass. Burning eyes lost their focus as Lillepen wept. Lothar had been so proud and full of light. He was the hero of Lynden, the joy of the Wolvmeadow, and like her father, he had been a mortal. History was nothing if not repetition.

Again she smiled the smile of the wry. Lillepen, Mistress of the Wolv's Trees like her mother before her, had fallen for a mortal man. Love that was not meant to be, fraught with impossibility, once again made its home the heart of an immortal stricken by an unlikely human.

She took the outstretched hand of the kobold. Rekke Red Mantle showed a strength that belied his stature, wrinkled and knotted face flushing ruddy as he pulled her upward off the frozen mud.

"Let her come and find me – it will be too late."

"Mistress, this isn't wise." Rekke Red Mantle's quicksilver eyes flashed in the dim light that permeated the charcoal and purple-bruised sky. The kobold scurried to pick up her staff. "Let's go find shelter, there'll be other days."

"Ah kobold," her grin was fierce, "you understand so little of me and my way. No matter my imminent demise. I do this for the survival of all the creatures of the Nord Aelt. Do you, like so many of our sprite-kin, truly believe that he would stop merely with Grenir's mortal descendents? Then why is Barath after me, daughter of the wolves?"

Lothar's heraldry waved in her mind's eye; silver tree flanked by a sword and star. A stunning face laughed his courage at the world; his strong arm lifted a blade forged by the Greygnomes, the dwarven masters of the Gildehalle. Finer metal there was not in all the Nord Aelt. Alas, she knew it was not enough. Before the hordes of Winter's Darkness it was fated to falter. She had seen him lead his men in a charge to save Aelrich's center. His flag went down in the crunching wave of the sea of combatants and never came up to the air again.

Screams were all she could hear for long after that.

It was the moment she had made up her mind. A moment of clarity when the world was hell bent on chaos and in which she understood that all the force brought to bear would not end this. Barath could not yet be vanquished. He would rise again to take up his cause of genocide; that much power had he come to wield, so strong was his mad hatred. One by one he would crush all the life out of the Nord Aelt.

First would come the wolf-kin that called her queen. Then would crumble the Greygnomes, the fair Grass Folk known as the Alfir, the Moss Folk, and the domestic kobolds hiding in the halls of man. What was destroyed after that did not matter, until in the end Barath had revenge on all the living that had witnessed his ultimate humiliation. Germione refused him so long ago, defying him, to stay true to her love.

Lillepen took up her simple wooden staff. It had been cut from an ancient oak within her favorite glade among the Wolv's Trees. Strength and reassurance flowed to her from the smooth wood. The Mother's spirit resided in the tree, as it did in all living things, but this oak was so old there was much more of her lingering in it. She propped herself against the staff and continued

scanning the fields.

Rekke Red Mantle pulled his crooked knife.

Lethal sounds of metal scraping from a hundred scabbards floated to Lillepen's recollection. Lothar's men trotted out from the keep of the Alpentor with swords twinkling under a rising sun. The gathered armies of the king Aelrich would meet Barath's coming storm head on. Leaf-shaped spearheads and broad axes of the Greygnomes, longbows of the Grass Folk, the staves of the Moss Folk, and hooked and notched blades of the kobolds, all came together with the swords of men, into a company that had never been seen before.

"Well, if it comes down to it this won't do me any good," said the kobold with a sigh, "but it makes me feel a little better, Lady Lillepen."

It hadn't done the races of the Nord Aelt any good either. They had floundered upon the Winter's Darkness like so many waves on the rocky cliffs of the Nord Sea. Foul and deadly things had been in waiting. The darkest and weak minded of sprites did Barath have under his iron fist. Wild Fängge, the twisted tree spirits of the northern forests had assaulted first. She saw the most fearsome of these, Firhag, Bloodbark, Pricklestick, and Trampletrunk, lead their brethren smashing into the ranks of Aelrich's men like falling trees. Soon the Bilwiz, the cursed cousins of the Alfir, with their poisoned and diseased shot, and the clawing Nixes of the water deep, trod the bloodied ground, spreading chaos and misery where they went.

The cries of the humans chilled Lillepen as then the Night Mares of Uthe were unleashed. These sprites of bad dreams caused insanity to ripple through the men and goodly sprites that stood to oppose them. They charged, horrid creatures of disfigurement, with horse-heads, goat-heads, and pig-snouts, grinning murder at Aelrich's force. Only Lothar's men still stood in the vanguard, with the Greygnomes barely holding one flank, and Aelrich with a contingent of the Alfir maintaining the middle of the line. About them the army was capitulating.

"Over there is what I seek." Lillepen began an unsteady walk. "To the old blossom tree over there. I think it is a cherry."

"Unusual here," Rekke Red Mantle shrugged, "isn't it?"

"Yes. There are not many such trees here in the valley below the Alpentor."

As if to accentuate her statement a ray of gold broke the cloud cover, trickling over the lone tree like honey. The grass around it was piercing and vibrant, verdant green where everything else in the landscape was the dull grey and black shadow of the sky. Thunder rumbled in the air and flashes of lightening sparked amongst the grey and the purple on the horizon.

From beside her, the kobold squinted into the light. "The sun. Ach, it hurts my eyes after all this darkness."

For three days it had hidden behind the clouds of the Winter's Darkness whilst below the sleet began to wash blood-soaked mud. Lillepen shook. This was another day of fighting. The battle for the Alpentor was surely coming to its close. Aelrich and his allies, the men and sprite-kind of the Nord Aelt had done what they could; had held on for as long as life's blood flowed in the veins of those brave warriors.

"You've never liked the sun, Rekke."

"Rekke Red Mantle, if you please," snapped the kobold.

Even so near the end he still made her laugh. Despite the fact that she could call him whatever she pleased by virtue of the oath he had taken, he yet corrected her with such spirit. She knew his full name, not merely what the humans recognised him by, and it was that power she had used to bind him. But he insisted vehemently, and she more often than not ignored his presumption.

Soon she would see whether he would do what she wanted.

"Well, I'd like it a lot better if it weren't like a beacon lighting the way for those that seek you."

Rekke Red Mantle looked about him with mistrustful, narrow eyes. "Must we walk up to the only sunlit patch in all the valley?"

Lillepen nodded. "It is necessary."

"Then pray to the Mother and Father that we're not found."

Prayers and blessings echoed in the bailey of the Alpentor before the men had marched out. She saw so clearly the faces of the mortals, fear and doubt painting them all, but a picture of nobility nonetheless, for all the grim courage they contained. Young boys and old men filled the ranks everywhere; seasoned champions had become scarce in the armies of Aelrich. The war of the Winter Prince had been waged for a long time now. *Why did they keep fighting?* There were cries of the women and children too, filling the courtyards, mourning already the dead that would fall.

"I prayed a long time ago," said Lillepen, striding with soft grace into the brightness. She looked up at the branches of the tree, holding her staff before her. "It is as I'd hoped. Bees."

"Bees?" the kobold wondered.

"Yes. The divine providers that the Mother and Father gifted the Nord Aelt."

Even over the thunder, the insects could be heard droning busily about the limbs of the cherry tree. She watched them swirl among the first of the season's blooms, working together to extract the delicate treasure within. This tree had the flowers of spring where the rest of the valley was still under the pall of winter.

A clear horn trumpeted a long note somewhere in the distance. The kobold tilted his head, pointed lobes twitching in a strained gesture of concentration.

"The rallying call of the Wolvmeadow!" Rekke Red Mantle whispered. "Aelrich gathers his men again."

"We have not heard it all day," said Lillepen, worry on her face. "He cannot have much left in him now. It is the end, I fear."

"Don't give up, dear lass," Rekke Red Mantle smiled.

Lothar had smiled at her one last time before setting out. It was such a human gesture. Something that she was sure all sprite-kind were incapable of. *How can he smile in the face of death, in the knowledge of impending obliteration?* He smoothed her hand, holding it between both of his. Her heart was pounding, loss and thrill tugging at it with an intensity she had never felt, and cared not to experience again.

His gentle grey eyes drank of hers; she knew he loved the strange yellow birthright of her line. *"Wolf-daughter, do not fret. Give me your love and we shall stride again under this sun,"* he said. Lillepen simply cupped his cheeks, not having the strength for words. Only a human would believe that possible against all these odds. And yet the humans had inspired much with their stoicism. Had not the dwarves from the Gildehalle come? The king of the Greygnomes, Rübezahl himself had led them. So too the mystical Alfir, the oldest sons and daughters of the Mother and Father pledged their help, and they never had sided with anyone before this.

"A good place to stand," Lillepen said.

"As you wish," Rekke Red Mantle nodded, "I'll just step back out of the light a bit. I still wish I knew what you are doing, maybe I can help."

"In this thing I travel alone, kobold." She threw him her staff. "Take this, it will help you find strength to hold your wards against Uthe. You must give me enough time."

Rekke Red Mantle swung the staff experimentally and it made a solid thrum. Rain and sleet turned to snow, gliding like white butterflies in the rays of the sun. "As much as you need, mistress."

In the end it was all she could see. Snow upon the bodies that littered the ground. Here and there, too many places, it was pink and red, and stained with bile and things she did not want to

think about. The face of an Alfir stuck in her mind. It had been beautiful, the Grass-kin slender and angular, with green eyes that still shone despite being frozen in rigor mortis. A tear of disbelief was forever captured on his cheek, a glacier upon his skin. *Had he truly believed that he would never meet death?*

Lillepen waited until her companion had removed himself sufficiently. Standing before the cherry tree, sunlight washing her frame, she began to sing like she always did. Her song matched the buzzing of the busy bees. For a gentle moment she lost herself, the heavy part of her heart washed away and replaced by the joy of simplicity.

Once her beloved's head had rested upon her lap. She dug her fingers into his hair, pulling and stroked it. He was so peaceful, eyes closed and looking every bit asleep, listening to her hum a melody. *"Why bees?"* he asked her. Lillepen hesitated; it was something she had never really explained to herself. The song had come naturally to her. Mother always said that a daughter of the wolves had a special bond to nature. Perhaps the bees were that. She did not know. But father had often marvelled at their harmony and spirit. Together they protected what mattered to them, *"not unlike the way of love"* he would say.

"She's here!" Rekke Red Mantle yelled.

From out of the grey field stepped Uthe. Midnight hair contrasted her pale, frosted skin. Her stare was like looking into ice pools, glittering and dull. The Black Lass hissed, and smiled a wicked grin.

Lillepen swallowed. Her voice rose in song, the pitch quickening as the Queen of Night Mares approached. The bees began to dance in wider circles from the tree.

"Mistress… I can't, please forgive me…" Rekke Red Mantle wailed in sorrow. All around him stood the sprites of dream, red eyes glaring out from horse and goat heads, scaled and feathered torsoes tensed to strike. "Lillepen, I… I'm sorry."

Uthe laughed.

Lillepen concentrated. She could hear the bees, warning her of the evil nearby. The insects swarmed, darting in and out from their branches, an ebb and flow as hypnotic as it was erratic. It took only moments for her to calm them with her lyric, and they understood what she intended. The swarm spun around the tree, encircling the Black Lass and the daughter of Germione. Their wings beat and stirred the air in a warm rhythm like a spring breeze.

Rekke Red Mantle pushed his way closer, ducking under the clutches of the nearest Night Mares. But as soon as he stood with the circle, the swarm set upon him. His breath became desperate, face contorted and wild.

Lillepen stared at him, all the while continuing her song.

"Please… there are other powers, they would destroy me," Rekke Red Mantle pleaded with her, swatting at the drones that attacked him. He dropped to his knees, flinching from the stings piercing his hide. "I can't save you now… we should have gone earlier, like I wanted."

The Black Lass swung a clawed hand, smashing the kobold against the trunk of the cherry tree. Thunder crashed overhead and the sunlight winked, sucked away by the storm. Somewhere nearer than before, the crystal call of the Wolvmeadow horn breached the air. The Winter Prince's huntress had found her prey and spun slowly.

"You have acted as I knew you would," Lillepen said to the whimpering Rekke Red Mantle. "Your oath is broken."

"N-no… I didn't…"

The bees hovered over Lillepen, a living cloud. Uthe ignored the swarm and stepped up, licking the blood of the kobold from her talons. Deadly power rippled from her cold body, pale skin

like a blizzard, frosted orbs sucking life from the world. She was fixated on the daughter of wolves, poised to murder.

A horn-blast shuddered again. It was more urgent and immediate than before. Lillepen shook her head; she could not afford distraction. Around the tree the Night Mares began to groan and mutter in fear. Before her, Uthe lifted a fist to the sky.

Lothar's fist rose in resolute strength. He saluted Lillepen and the people of the Alpentor. As hopeless as the struggle was, he had shown nothing but love and faith. The heroic son of Lynden rode out to join Aelrich and be counted, no matter the futility. "*For love. It is everything I have,*" he boasted. Her beloved had been nothing if not honest about his feelings, and memories of him brought her a flood of tears.

Now she would join him in death and live up to his hope. Lillepen would ensure that the Nord Aelt had something to rise against the Winter Prince with once more; something she had discovered in loving a mortal. It was a lesson her father had once taught, but she had never understood till now. *How could an immortal sprite know of this unless thrust unto this very depth?*

Grenir and Lothar had given her a symbol that could stand against the Winter's Darkness, something of life. It was the essence of everything that grew, the very heart of the living itself. It was the song of spring, the renewal of hope.

The Black Lass flashed her hated fangs and raked them down in a killing blow. Lillepen reeled with pain, blood and tears blurring her vision. Over the ringing in her ears she heard her champion cry, "Lilly! No!"

Her body hit the earth, life draining so quickly she could not feel the cold of ice and snow on the grass. Flickering eyes turned up to see the sword of Lothar cut a path through Night Mares. Uthe backed away, the blood of her prey dripping onto the white ground. Lillepen struggled to breath.

The Daughter of the Wolves smiled to see her lover's face. Above her swayed the swarm and she whispered, "Take my soul, lovely bees. Remember my message; honour my cause. Pass down the wisdom of my father… One day it will be time to use it to free me, free all the Nord Aelt."

Lillepen closed her eyes. She was content she had escaped Barath's hate, and preserved that which he sought to destroy.

The End

Leave a message for this story.

Continued from page 20

netherworld."

"How close," asked Mark, "Philadelphia or New York?" He spoke of the two earlier impact site predictions. They now predicted that it would impact in the Atlantic Ocean about three hundred kilometers east of Cape Cod, Massachusetts. "I can't believe…"

"All I'm saying is that we're missing a great opportunity here. If we would have sent a probe just a few hours before the missiles, we could have learned so much more."

It was an argument they had several times before, mostly because David had been writing a technical paper on terraforming Mars -- transforming the Martian environment to be earth-like. He planned on submitting to the scientific journal *Nature* under the title, *Using Asteroids to Promote the Terraforming of Mars*. "David, your paper isn't important enough to risk lives. There's no point in gathering terraforming data if it risks destroying terra firma."

"You're both wrong." John spoke for the first time. He usually didn't involve himself in these arguments, and the conversation came to a complete halt. Unlike David, who seemed to thrive on them, John would usually withdraw into his work anytime voices were raised. He had done so this time and was still sitting in front of his computer, his eyes glued to the monitor.

Everyone else just stared at him.

He glanced up at them with a blank look and added, "Five minutes, thirty-two seconds to impact." He returned to his monitor.

Aaron chuckled and said, "He's right. Let's can the discussion and get back to …"

David cut him off. "The laws of physics won't change if we don't watch it."

"Not if it's quantum physics," said John.

Mark would not be put off so easily. "So, John, how can we both be wrong?" Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Aaron throw up his arms in disgust.

John answered, "How often does a global buster hit the Earth?"

"So … what, ten times larger Hachiman?"

John nodded.

"On average, once every thousand centuries, you know that."

"Wouldn't it be considered a natural event … a cyclical event … an event that regenerates evolution?" He leaned forward and spoke in low, certain terms, pulling in their attention with his intensity. "It's needed to periodically clean house."

"Oh, come on," groaned David. "That's worse than my suggestion."

Why did it seem that with this group, the most intense discussions started at the worst times? Mark gave the screen one last glance, folded his arms and gave John his full attention. He had heard the theory of evolution to justify some pretty ugly ideas, everything from eugenics to evolutionary racism, and he wondered if this was just another one.

"It gives the biosphere a clean slate to work with," John said. "Consider forest fires. We kept suppressing fires for decades, and now we have those mega-fires covering whole states. Maybe this is …"

Mark shook his head. "It's not even close to the same. The mega-fires are so intense because the kindling hasn't been burnt up by smaller fires. What's the kindling here?"

"Us."

Several groans.

"We're not like kindling," David said. "We have nothing to do with Hachiman other than getting in its way. Kindling feeds a fire's destruction, making it worse. We just …"

"OK," said John, "forget the fire analogy. But just think about the natural cycles."

David slapped his forehead.

Mark thought John had a point but didn't like the implication, especially if it conflicted with his Christian world view. He searched his memory for eschatological references to the world being destroyed by a falling rock. He couldn't think of any. "You're taking environmentalism to an extreme," he said. "What are you going to do, John, hug asteroids like they do trees?"

"Four minutes," said Aaron. "Wait. There's a change in the data. Hachiman's changing course."

"What?" asked Mark.

"Look for yourself."

He saw the numbers on the screen. All thoughts about their conversation faded, and he felt the rush of adrenaline flow anew in his veins.

After a six minute long game of cat and mouse between the missiles and the meteor, one finally impacted. The other two missed. To their surprise, the explosion not only changed Hachiman's course, it fragmented it.

Mark juggled an opened laptop computer on his knees and held a fresh cup of coffee in his hand, trying to jot down a note in his logbook. His cell phone rang. He tried grabbing for it but both the coffee and his laptop started to slip. He grabbed the laptop and lost the coffee. When he answered the phone and heard the voice of Karen Mason, Media Relations Specialist, he suppressed an outburst.

"No, Karen. We don't know why it fragmented," he said, wiping a coffee covered palm on his trousers. "The missile should have deflected it, nothing more."

"Well," asked Karen, "do you at least know where the fragments are headed, or if they'll survive the atmosphere?"

"We should know in less than five minutes." He searched in vain through a pile of empty pizza boxes for napkins, found a box of tissues, and used them to clean up the mess on the floor.

"Toss me a bone, here, Mark. I need to go back to the press with something. We promised up-to-the-minute coverage. "

"All right, has anything been said about Hachiman changing course just before the missiles intercepted it?" As soon as he said it he wished he hadn't told her. "Wait. Don't use that. It may not be wise to tell the public, yet."

"Why?"

"There are too many psychos out there who would consider a hiccup a sure sign that Hachiman's an alien spacecraft or something."

"Hiccup?" she asked. "This isn't a comet."

"OK, maybe 'hiccup' isn't the right word, but there must have been some form of out-gassing that changed its vector. Irene thinks it had comet-like properties because the only way she can explain the sudden change of direction is out-gassing, but don't tell the press yet."

"Why not?"

"It's only speculation. If anything does survive, we still expect impact somewhere in the

Atlantic Ocean. Go to the public with that."

"Isn't there a chance of hitting land or causing a tsunami?"

"No. Aaron said he's going to try to call to a marine biologist he knows out in that area. That's if the rock doesn't fall on the poor kid." Mark pinched the bridge of his nose. "That was supposed to be a joke." He waited for a response but didn't get any. "Anyway, I'd like to get samples of it if we can. I'm asking for …"

"Samples? How are you going to get samples? Isn't it metallic?"

"No, it's carbonaceous -- containing organic mater, water soluble salts, magnetite, and clay, that sort of thing, or at least we think so. I'm asking for water samples from the research vessel. Maybe that will help us understand why it changed course and exploded."

The desk phone rang. David answered it and put in on the speakerphone. Dr. Irene Clemmons' voice came over it. "We're getting new data."

Mark spoke into his cell phone, "Karen, I'll call you right back."

"I see five fragments with probable entry vectors," Irene said. "Wait. Is John there?"

"Yes." John removed his reading glasses and leaned toward the speakerphone.

"You should recheck my data," Irene said, "but they seem to be taking new courses."

"She's right," said John. "Give me a sec. I'll run a simulation." Mark leaned over to his screen and squinted at the numbers.

"This looks like more than a hiccup," Mark mumbled.

Aaron looked up at him with a half-smile, "Yeah, this thing had some serious gas."

"Here we go," David reported. "Looks like, the Pacific Ocean near Los Angeles, Ukraine, the Gobi Desert, and one off the coast of Japan. Only one still headed for the Atlantic. Specific coordinates on the screen."

"Good Lord in heaven, save us," Aaron gasped.

Those who weren't too stunned spoke at once. "Someone's going to get hit. I hope Skywatch notifies Ukraine."

"They'll take care of it."

"Thank God only one place is populated. There's not much in the Gobi."

Mark brought up Karen's number on his cell phone and pressed dial, ducking around to shield the ambient noise. "Karen, the fragments are heading in new trajectories." He read her all five coordinates. She acknowledged and hung up. He felt a twinge of guilt. Could they have done more to help avoid this? But Hachiman was so erratic, almost as if it had a mind of its own, there was no way they could have predicted its behavior.

Mark leaned over to talk into the speakerphone. "I'd like to get samples of these rocks before any of the locals spoil the scene."

Everyone agreed. The autopsy of Hachiman had begun.

Research Ship James Cook II, Atlantic Ocean, 240 km east of Cape Cod

Seven years earlier, Oceanographer Juan Gonzales adopted the thirty-seven meter long research vessel *James Cook II* as his home. He knew the quirks of all the lab equipment as if they were his own children. He loved the North Atlantic, the taste of salt in the air, the cold spray on his face, the gentle rocking of the ship … well, not always gentle. Most of all he loved the life teaming within the ocean. To most people the oceans were barriers, voids where land ceased, interruptions of life. Juan knew better. If anything, it was the other way around, but the moment his sensors indicated the nature of the meteor impact, he knew his ocean had changed forever.

"As far as I can tell," he reported his findings to Aaron via a satellite phone, "we're dealing with diseased plankton." This phone call and the reason for it had totally obliterated any schedule he expected for the day.

"Diseased? What, like a virus or something?" asked Aaron.

"It's not like the plankton has an immune system, you know? They're just not acting right." Two of Juan's curious college interns, who should have been busy taking samples if it had remained a normal day, stood listening behind him.

"Then how do you know it's diseased?"

Juan glanced over his shoulder at the interns who shook their heads, dumbfounded. "They're converting oxygen into carbon monoxide at an accelerated rate. Don't ask me how. I won't know until I look at them under a transmission electron microscope, but we don't have much time to waste."

"What do you mean?" asked Aaron.

"We got a real problem here. The fish, they're dying. We're reading oxygen depletion down to 300 meters, and it's spreading."

"Any expansion rate estimates?"

"Eh." Juan rubbed his forehead. "Based upon the initial contamination size, I'd say fourteen square kilometers since impact. Madre de Dios, I haven't seen anything like this before in my life."

"Were you able to get close enough to ground zero to collect trace elements?"

"No, and I wouldn't be able to now. I've called the Coast Guard and I think they're going to widen the quarantine area." He heard a sigh on the other end. "They're sending helicopters to evacuate our ship."

"Helicopters?" asked Aaron.

"Yes, they say we might spread the organism. It might be on our hull." He thought of all the memories he would be leaving behind and the possibility of never seeing them again. How could this happen so quickly? "Hey, what was on that rock, anyway?"

"Mud."

74 km northwest of Plotava, Ukraine

Ukrainian Astrophysicist Feodor Dubovik clung to his hood, fighting the wind. Two more helicopters were landing, bringing the latest United Nations Task Force technicians to the crash site. He headed for one of the Task Force tents set up for microscopic analysis. He took care walking down the new, narrow path though the forest. Someone had loaned him a flashlight, and the beam danced before him.

"It appears to be a …" he searched for the English word "… an explosion in the atmosphere like in Siberia," he yelled into his cell phone, to overcome the background noise, but it had the effect of exaggerating his accent. "Livestock and human dead from it but not dead from just explosion. There is something else."

"Can you get to ground zero?" He could barely make out what they were saying, even though he pressed the cell phone to his ear.

"No. More dead downwind. Area is blocked off. There is some sort of microorganism riding on pollen. We see high levels of methane and nitrous oxide gases.

In the phone he heard someone say, "Holy cow, these are greenhouse gases."

Feodor nodded. "We expect it come from the organisms. The local government proposes using fire bombs to destroy this organism, but I think it will just make matters worse."

"Why."

"The organisms seem silicone-based. We never come across them before. They just a theory till now, but our theories say they thrive on higher temperatures." He made it to the tent and returned the flashlight. "What do you Americans think?" No answer. "Hello?" Not even static. "Hello!" He shook his head. "Cell phones," he added in Ukrainian. "They'll kill us all, yet."

In the air above Los Angeles, California

Aaron and Mark flew in the back of an Air Force helicopter to Santa Monica. Both of them had donned hazardous materials protection gear called HAZMAT suits in case the fragment carried a biological agent. Mark hated to fly. He knew statistics were in his favor and that he would probably land safely, but felt his lungs tighten and heart pound even before he entered the helicopter. He had no idea how the closeness he felt inside the craft would make the terror increase. He refused to look outside and pretended that he sat in a crowded subway. It worked until they took off. Oh, man. What if he vomited in his helmet? They never told him what to do, and this was his first time wearing the full body, airtight gear. He tried closing his eyes, but that only added to a sense of vertigo. He opened them and saw an Air Force sergeant sitting across from him, smiling.

He tried to carry on a conversation with Aaron but found it impossible with the suits on and the roar of the helicopter blades above. He wished they didn't have to wear the suits in flight. The officer in charge said that if they waited until they landed to put them on, it would be too late. At least this lack of interaction gave him time to ponder Hachiman's recent journey, the first chance he had to do so in days. He thought of all the peculiarities it exhibited. Mark ventured a look out his window, pretending it was a video display, and saw the coastline. A wisp of vapor trailed towards the shore. Then an idea hit him, and terror seized him anew, a terror that made the fear of flying seem childish.

The helicopter arrived on the beach near the impact site and at the head of the vapor trail. A police line guarded by the National Guard in camouflaged HAZMAT gear held unwanted and unprotected spectators several blocks away. As Mark and Aaron emerged, the crowd's eyes were locked on the mist trail. Mark dialed the rest of the team at Palomar and Maui. He relayed what he saw to them.

A smooth, metallic object twice the size of a football cut through the waves before them and propelled itself ashore with a jet of vapor. The fire department Hazardous Material's team approached it with several sensors extended. When the object cracked in quarters, the firemen retreated. It sprouted legs and sent a tentacle drilling into the ground.

Mark closed his gaping mouth and spoke into the phone, "David, it was more than just a hiccup. It changed path on its own. It's a probe. They sent a Probe."

Over the phone came two voices at once. "What?" "Who sent a probe?"

He looked at Aaron who nodded. "Whoever's trying to terraform earth."

The End

Leave a message for this story.

Continued from page 23
large suitcases. She looked around her room – hers for only a few hours more – seeing it as a place both familiar and strange. She wandered around the room, past all the equipment and boxes her cousin had brought over earlier in the day, touching a drawer handle here, running her fingers over a wooden side there, finally stopping in front of the full-length mirror mounted into the door of her wardrobe. She looked at the slightly distorted reflection of the room behind her, eyes moving to the very edge of the reflection out of habit. The mirror just showed an edge of one of her windows, the one that overlooked the garden. When she was younger she had often dreamed that there was a parallel world in her mirror, and that the reflection-window looked out onto a vast snowy plain with cruel peaks in the distance; a cold, remote world – everything that the prim lawn in her respectable neighbourhood in Karachi was not.

Abruptly, Alia leaned closer to the mirror, squinting sideways at the reflection-window. For just a blink of an eye, she thought she saw curtain-movement and a white-glimmer, but the reflection was just a reflection after all. However, if she peered closer…

"Alia, wake up." The door opened, and her aunt poked her head in to say this in a piercing whisper.

Alia whirled around, feeling foolish at being caught in such a silly pose; embarrassment that suddenly gave way to a surge of anger she scarcely recognized at the intrusion. She had not felt such a strong emotion in months.

"You should have been sleeping," her aunt scolded. "It's time for you to get ready now, but you will not look as fresh as you should." Upon that dire note, her aunt left as suddenly as she had come, without waiting for a reply. Not that it mattered. Alia had not been in the habit of voicing her opinions for many weeks now. It seemed people stopped listening to her after she agreed to Nasir's proposal. Before, she had been courted and sought-after by young men and their mothers; Alia was a vivacious young woman, with a manner that perfectly balanced style and a becoming modesty. A trifle too dark, but a respectable family background and a pair of lively eyes covered many flaws. After her engagement, though she had been talked at and asked questions of, no one paid the least mind to her opinions. She spent all her time in wedding preparations without ever having the deciding vote on any matter, and no time at all preparing herself for marriage.

Marriage to Nasir. Alia fought the panic that suddenly bubbled up inside her. She wondered suddenly if she could call this whole thing off – maybe she could just run away – but the door was thrown open and a whole gaggle of female relatives entered, lights snapping on in their wake. Alia, blinking, dazed like a doe caught mid-flight in headlights, was swept up by their activity towards her dressing table. She submitted, as she had learnt to do these past months when she was given a thousand and one bits of advice (some of which were contradictory) by various people. The girl who was once known to go her own way, do her own thing, defying accepted notions of beauty and fashion, enjoying her darker skin and perversely wearing shirts long and loose when the fashion was for short and tight, found herself buckling under the mountain of trivial advice and platitudes. She had learnt that it was far better to smile and nod than displease the elders of her clan. It was sobering to realise how very little independence she really had. It had pleased her family to indulge her whims, sending her to college, allowing her to travel, but they were determined on a traditional wedding to a very traditional type of groom. Alia found herself hating Nasir, and all that he stood for, with a sudden passion.

And now they were going to dress her up like a doll. Her cousin, Mehrunissa, was in charge of her makeup and hair. Alia was not at all sure she liked Mehrunissa's style for dramatic makeup, but her cousin had made a mark in the fashion world as Mehr (she preferred this version of her name, thinking it to be more classy. Her relatives continued to call her Mehru as they had always done), and

therefore, her preferences overrode the bride's. Besides, her mother said, "Think how lucky you are that you don't have to go to a beauty salon. Mehru can take care of you at home just fine."

Alia sat still as Mehru worked on her, while her mother and various aunts hovered around and gave advice. Behind her, two younger cousins sat on her bed, giggling over a magazine. They could afford to be light-hearted, Alia thought sourly. Her eyes kept wandering to the mirror in the wardrobe, the only slice in her field of vision that was not filled with either people or Mehru's equipment. The bright lights Mehru had brought in, after declaring the lighting in Alia's room inadequate, hurt her eyes.

"Don't turn your head to that side so much," Mehru scolded. Alia obediently stared straight at the mirror in front of her and, seeing the stranger they were making her over into, let her eyes slip back longingly towards the wardrobe. As Mehru jerked her head back into place, she thought she saw once again a flash of white.

Talk and laughter flowed over her. Alia listened to none of it. Her whole being was suddenly intensely aware that something, something, was happening in the mirror of that old wardrobe. From the corner of her eye, she thought she saw a light winking at her, impish and beckoning. What if it really was a magical mirror? What if her white world did exist? Outwardly, Alia sat passive, but inside she was shaking with hope and anticipation and the fear of a crushing disappointment.

At last, they were finished with her face and hair. Her dress had been brought in, probably by her mother, who had guarded it jealously since its arrival from the designer's workshop. Alia stood up in her petticoats (once upon a time she would've refused to let so many people see her like this), and was zippered and hooked into the heavy satiny-silk fabric. Her aunts cried, her cousins cooed, Mehru beamed. Alia wanted to run, but her limbs were too heavy. She sank back onto the stool, eyes downcast.

Now for the jewellery. Rings were slipped on her fingers and bangles onto her wrists. A very young cousin was allowed to put a heavy gold-and-ruby necklace on her and painfully caught a strand of her hair in it as she did so. Her mother hooked earrings into her ear lobes. Someone brought her slippers, pretty and golden and silly, and she stood up and looked at herself in Mehru's mirror.

She saw a bride, dressed in red and gold. She was made-up and ornamented and gorgeous – and like every other bride she had ever seen. There was nothing of the Alia she knew in this creature before her. She stared in blank horror. Hysteria welled up inside her, and for a wild moment she thought about running, screaming from the room and down the stairs and out of the house…a mad woman in bridal finery. But where would she go? Would she roam the streets all night? Alia stood frozen while despair, helplessness, and panic roiled within her. *It's too late to do anything about it. You're going to be Mrs. Nasir Ahmed in less than an hour.*

Everyone else was pleased. Her mother was moved to tears, there was some last-minute adjustments of hair and touching up of lipstick. Then, reverently, the heavily embroidered *dupatta* was draped carefully over her head and fastened with pins. Her head bowed under the weight. Locked into a bubble of silence, the perfect demure bride, Alia wanted to sink into the floor. *Too late, too late.*

Is it?

The voice was in her head, but it wasn't hers. Alia's head jerked towards the wardrobe, but there were too many people in the way. She opened her mouth to order them out of her way…

"Fariha Baji is here." The door opened abruptly (no one bothered to knock anymore, thought Alia furiously, feeling like public property), and a second cousin she didn't know very well at all poked her head in.

"I must go say hello," said her aunt, and bustled off, taking the messenger who'd been looking

curiously at Alia with her.

Almost immediately a discreet knock sounded, and a maid (only the servants could be bothered to be polite!) called out that the photographers were here. Alia's mother and some aunts left to usher them to the drawing room where the photos of the bride and groom were to be taken. The door opened again; the cameramen hired to tape guests eating and talking for an interminable three hours at the reception had also arrived. Someone wanted Mehru. Within a few minutes, Alia found herself blessedly, unexpectedly alone with her reflection and her bridal regalia. Even the teenaged cousins had abandoned the old issues of Vogue and Cosmopolitan.

The hum of the air conditioner, which had been drowned by the chatter and noise of people coming and going, was loud in the quiet room. Alia stood very still, not daring to move or look in the direction of the wardrobe. Just fancies in the brain, she told herself, trying to calm her fluttering heart. Snowy plains, indeed. Just the product of bridal nerves. But she knew she had to look.

Alia walked up to the mirror and drew in her breath sharply. Before her, instead of the reflection of the sad remains of her soon-to-be-emptied room, was a glittering white landscape. She took one step closer and found herself standing at the very threshold of the new world. Behind her was a house full of wedding guests and a life as Mrs. Nasir Ahmed. Before her was – snow. She had never seen snow before, never touched it. She had imagined it to be like the vanilla ice cream she scooped into bowls; softly rounded, smooth, and slightly melting. But what was in front of her looked gritty and glittered like some sort of sand. In the distance, the mountains lay sullen and bleak, like she had always thought they would.

But there was also a castle off in the distance. A light blinked and beckoned from its highest tower.

Come, come.

Alia hesitated, torn between the desire to take the plunge and the fear of the unknown. She was aware that any moment someone would come back in, and this moment, this world, would vanish like a dream. There was no time to think, or to change her shoes. She heard a murmur of voices outside her room – *they* were coming back to take her way, and sign the marriage contract and be tied for life to…Nasir's face with the silly moustache she didn't like flashed before her eyes. Panic rose up within her, yelling at her to *Go!* In a flash, she made her decision and stepped through. From the corner of her eye, she saw the door handle turn. The air shimmered and darkened around her. Alia's stomach dropped, and her insides churned alarmingly, but then the blinding whiteness of snow swelled around her.

* * *

She expected to sink heavily into the snow and was surprised to find that she did not. She pulled her skirts out of the way and looked thoughtfully down at her slippered feet. She appeared to be standing *on* the snow. And what's more, her slippers weren't soaked through. She wriggled her toes. Still warm, still there.

Alia turned her head to look behind her. It was more of the same, snow rippling away all around her in a gigantic world. There was just a hint of a shimmer in the air a few feet from her, then it winked out. She knew then there was no going back, at least not the way she had come. She was surprised at how calmly she took that realization – the sensible part of her that would never have done something so unpredictable and, and *dangerous,* had probably fainted from horror, she thought with a sudden giggle. She clapped a hand over her mouth – she was in an alien world far away from home and she *shouldn't* be laughing – but it burst out of her. She chuckled and roared and cried,

feeling the dammed up emotion of months come pouring out.

* * *

Two men stood in a room at the top of the highest tower of the castle, looking through a large window at the shuddering red-clad figure. The woman sat huddled on the ground, her knees drawn up to her chest, forehead pressed against kneecaps, shoulders heaving.

"Congratulations, Raigul," said the Duke in his dry manner. "It appears to have worked."

The other, a younger man, looked worried. "Do you," he began timidly, "do you think she's… *insane*, your Grace?"

The Duke shrugged. "Well, it's highly likely that only an *insane* person would take the jump. Most *people* would be far too sensible to leave the familiar for the strange …and unknown."

Raigul looked crestfallen. All that work for a mad woman…

"However," said the Duke, "we may have found a woman in dire straits, desperate enough to take the jump. A veritable damsel in distress. We may have saved her from a fate worse than….ah, look. She appears to be pulling herself together."

* * *

Alia lifted her head wearily. That short but violent bout of weeping had exhausted her. She felt drained, but more relaxed than she had for months. Her shoulders felt sore from all the weeks of being stiffened by stress. And, she thought gladly, she wasn't marrying Nasir right now. She refused to think about her family. *They'll be worried, but I can't do anything about that now.* She thrust them from her mind and tried to think ahead. First, some tissue paper – but no, she hadn't thought to snatch up the plump little gold-sequined purse that was assuredly stuffed with wads of tissue. Brides were expected to cry.

Her makeup must be a mess. She could only imagine the tear-trails down her cheek, the mascara smeared all around her eyes making her look like a raccoon or a bandit, her lipstick all gone. Alia shrugged and struggled to her feet, planting her hands on level, firm ground as she scrambled up. The ground was pleasantly cool and not damp at all. She looked towards the castle. The light beckoned to her still. Alia turned a slow 360 degrees. Everywhere else was …white snow. Oh well.

Holding a fistful of red material, she carefully walked forward. She neither sank nor slipped in the snow, and she noticed that her dragging skirts slid behind her as if on a smooth floor. *Magic*, she thought suddenly and gleefully. She heard a wind blowing but it didn't move so much as a strand of hair out of place, or chill her at all.

Alia resolutely headed towards the castle with the blinking light.

* * *

The Duke and Raigul, one impassive, the other with obvious relief, watched the young woman slowly make her way across the snow.

"Interesting," commented the Duke as his eyes took in every detail of their soon-to-be visitor, noting the dark complexion, the tear-stained but resolute face, the heavily embroidered outfit. "And you added a weather-negation spell as well. How thoughtful of you, Raigul. We shall all sing praises to your genius soon." His tone was gently mocking.

Raigul beamed. "Well, it was simple really. Just modified Wzacxly's Search Algorithm, set the

relevant parameters, and activated an inter-dimensional search spell." His chest swelled with pride and he opened his mouth to elaborate.

"Indeed," said the Duke, cutting him off. He waved a languid hand, and a figure that had been hovering respectfully in the background detached itself from the shadows. "Ah, Benyan, will you please make sure that the Red Bedchamber is in readiness for our guest? And tell the guards at the gate to let the young," he paused, "*lady* in. And, here's a message for the Prince. It must be sent at once – he's very eager to meet our visitor."

Benyan murmured something that sounded like, "Very good, your Grace," took the scroll, and left swiftly. The Duke turned back to the window. Raigul was watching the woman, a frown on his face. "I hope she's *human,* your Grace."

"Wasn't that a condition of the spell?" The Duke walked stiffly over to the fireplace where a small, smoky fire gave off minimal heat. Even with the hot underground springs the castle, and especially the towers, tended to be on the chilly side. Another side effect of the curse. He hoped the woman was hardy.

"Yes, it was, your Grace, but these things can be so…unpredictable." Raigul waved his hands helplessly. His was a very *unstable* personality, thought the Duke. One minute he was oozing bombastic confidence, the next, close to despair.

"We will have the physician look her over," said the Duke soothingly. "In the meantime, hadn't you better set the language translation spell?"

"Yes, of course," said Raigul, relieved to have something else to do. He turned away from the window to a worktable littered with parchment and complicated instruments made up of metal wires, rods and discs. Soon he was muttering, staring with ferocious concentration at the blue haze forming between his hands.

The Duke continued to look out the window.

* * *

Alia scrambled down yet another snow bank. From a distance, the way had looked smooth and level. She'd been going across this bumpy countryside for what seemed like hours, and the castle wasn't getting any closer. Whatever it was that was keeping her warm and dry wasn't much good at helping her over the rough spots. She had to concentrate on where she put her feet. She was glad of that. It kept her from thinking too much.

* * *

"She seems to be taking the long way here, your Grace." Raigul had finished the language translation spell ages ago. The woman was still a good way from the castle.

"*Not* country-bred," said the Duke. He frowned at the sky outside. It was getting dangerously close to sunset. "I should have sent out some guards," he muttered to himself. It was too late now. The woman had better hurry. The kraugs would be out soon. They hadn't even considered the possibility the woman they called would spend a good amount of time crying, and then leisurely stroll towards the castle, getting distracted by perfectly commonplace things like icicles on trees and glassy streams.

* * *

Alia was tired. She had stopped pausing to admire the wonders she noticed along the way. She had spent too much time looking over that rainbow-coloured chunk of (*crystal? ice?*) that had been sticking out of the snow somewhere back along her meandering route. But even she could see that the light was taking on the rich honeyed gleam of sunset, and she did not want to be out here when night fell. Ignoring her pinching shoes, she forced herself to go faster.

* * *

The wind had picked up, and it whipped around the Duke and Raigul as they stood at the very top of the tower. From the battlements, they had a panoramic view of the snowscape, but they weren't here to admire it. Both men had round glasses perched on their noses and they scanned anxiously for the kraugs. Behind them the beacon burned with a cold light.

"Can't you teleport her in?" the Duke shouted above the wind.

"No, your Grace," Raigul yelled back. "It's much too risky. Fabric of reality….ripped…side effects….against the rules…magic conservation." The wind blew away his words as they emerged.

The Duke suddenly stiffened. "A kraug! Quick, a fireball!"

* * *

Alia, head bent, was trudging over the snow, when a high-pitched cry and a sudden glow mushroomed up from somewhere over a hill on her left. She didn't want to know what that was. She looked ahead at the castle. It was much closer now. It was also a lot darker. Her *dupatta* was too heavy. Reaching up, she tore it off her head, wincing as she pulled out strands of hair. It slithered down her back like a weight falling off, and Alia stepped out of her shoes and began to run. She had run long-distance and relay in school. She hoped she had the stamina to get to the castle.

* * *

Raigul hopped around, hurling fireballs at any kraugs who dared to come within two miles of the woman, in an indiscriminate use of power. His face was contorted with a mad glee – he was enjoying himself hugely.

The Duke relaxed. The woman had dropped her head-covering and abandoned her shoes and was fleeing towards the castle. She was close to the protective circle…ah, through the wards now.

"Raigul," he shouted sternly, to get the young man's attention. "Raigul!" He had to shout even louder.

Raigul paused, a huge ball of flame poised delicately on his fingertips.

"The young lady is safe within the wards," the Duke said loudly and slowly, eyeing the fireball. "You can stop siphoning off our precious magical reserves now, Raigul."

Raigul sighed. The fireball whined, grew smaller and disappeared with a wet, sucking noise.

* * *

Alia stood in the shadow of the huge gates. It was much darker here. She jumped as they swung open ponderously, but silently. Her awed gaze travelled up the tangled mess of spires, towers, statues and windows of the castle. She was no architect, but gothic was what came to mind. She felt very small, but she forced her feet to move. She walked through the gate.

* * *

"Come," said the Duke to Raigul, as the woman entered the castle grounds. "Let us go to meet her. We've waited a long time for the arrival of the Prince's bride."

The End

Leave a message for this story.

Continued from page 26
do I know you didn't steal this?"

Jaylin's patience shredded further. "Do you think the Prince would have given a note like that to a man who would have been easily robbed? A man who is coming out of the Tier of Aster?"

The sheriff nodded. "Good point, sir. Good point." One of the other sheriffs whispered something to him, and he nodded and stepped aside. "On your way then. Hurry along."

Jaylin took the note back, slipping it into his pocket, and noticed one of the sheriffs eyeing him as he walked away. The dark-bearded sheriff leaned over to the same one that had accosted him and whispered something. Jaylin only heard the word 'scar.' He was past them now, on the bridge between Aster and Median. Neither sheriff moved, but both stared at him.

He walked with calm strides, pretending to ignore what he had just heard. They probably knew who he was, and after meeting both the Mark and Lady Minya, was likely easy to point out considering his looks and scarred cheek. He risked one glance back and saw the dark-bearded sheriff had started following, at a distance, while the other spoke with the rest of the gate watch. As Jaylin kept his pace, he noticed someone detach from a building on his left and begin following him too. They were boxing him in. Looking ahead, he saw the other gate at the far end of Runner's Bridge. There were dozens of legion sheriffs guarding it. Though the bridge was crowded, Jaylin knew they were following him and that he couldn't afford to get caught, especially by the Mark, and especially with Kalisha's letter in his boot.

The pursuers didn't make any attempt to accost him. They followed to one side and behind him, as if driving him toward the other gate, its weathered stone and portcullis looking like a dog's maw in the distance. There were only two ways back across the Semn, Jaylin realized. Of course Lady Minya would have been waiting for him at both.

"Very wise of you to think of that now," Jaylin murmured to himself. He felt like a fool.

He watched the buildings on both sides. The carts and hurrying folk lumbered across Runner's bridge, for it spanned two worlds. Jaylin reached the mid-point and felt freedom inching closer. Yet as he drew near to the gates of the Tier of Median, a cluster of men stood near the sheriffs, talking. They were watching him. How many now? Several men on his right, several on his left, and he didn't know how many behind. Boxed in. If he reached the gates, he would be stopped and searched. He looked at the inns parading the street on the right. Slim aisles wedged between them, and from those gaps he saw the waves of the Semn and down river, the Steene. There was another option off the bridge.

A cluster of men left the gate and started toward him. He recognized one of them, for he had a nasty bruise on his face from when Jaylin dropped on him in the tunnels beneath Lunis.

"Well, if I'm going to die in this City," Jaylin muttered and spat on the ground, "it will not be by these men. Thasos, I hope you were wrong about the bridge flyers."

The rest of the group waiting by the gate detached and approached him. The men on his left started turning in as well. Behind him, he heard the other men quicken their pace.

Jaylin looked at the man with the bruised cheek. And winked at him.

After whipping off his cloak and hat, he ran.

Not ahead, but to the side, sprinting ahead of the men on his right, between them and the ones approaching from the gate. His pursuers reacted at once, charging from every direction. Jaylin was quicker. He made it to a thin alley, limiting his pursuers chance to crowd around him.

"Cut around the other side!" someone shouted. "Trap him in the back! Go!"

Jaylin saw a gutter pipe along the alley wall and he jumped up on it, shimmying the groaning pipe up towards the roof. It bucked and rattled as another man started up behind him. Jaylin climbed past the second floor, scraping his hands and praying he wouldn't slip.

"What's going on out there?" someone inside the building demanded.

"Milgen, a rat!" a woman shrieked. "I think it's a rat!"

"To the roof!" A commotion of voices rushed past Jaylin's ears. "He's climbing to the roof!"

Grabbing the ridge of the roof, Jaylin swung himself up. His heart pounded in his chest. The top of the roof sloped downward, the shingles dry and loose. There would not be enough room to get a running jump to the river. As he turned around, the first of his pursuers, a man with a gawky nose, reached the top after him.

"My best to Lady Minya," Jaylin said, kicking him in the face. The gawky-nosed fellow arched backwards and dropped, flailing his arms. Shouts and grunts erupted as those below fell with him. Bodies tangled in the alley floor. Onlookers halted to watch and point.

Jaylin scrambled up the shingles and they started slipping beneath him like loose rocks. He nearly fell. Bending low to the roof, he scurried like a squirrel and rounded the top. The Semn stretched out below, its waters quick and bulging. He needed a good running start to reach it, but the roof was too unstable. On the other side of the roof, he heard people climbing up the gutters and shouts within the house. It would be more of a risk jumping from up there. Behind him was another rooftop, but its tiles looked sturdier.

That was more promising. Jaylin backed up and then took a running leap. The alley was wider than it looked. He barely caught the edge of the roof and felt his heart drop down in his boots as pain wracked his middle. He struggled to climb up.

"There he is! Bring the crossbows!"

Jaylin strained and pulled himself up as crossbow bolts lanced up at him from the alley. He rolled onto the roof, the wood jolting as the bolts hit near him. On the other roof, several other pursuers had surfaced. They saw him and started the dangerous trek over the roof, slipping and stumbling on the loose shingles. An avalanche of wood spilled over the side. Jaylin rose and looked again at the Semn.

It was a long way down.

"I must be mad," he whispered, staring at the surging water. He stepped back and started running toward the edge to jump into the river.

Jaylin's right leg crashed through and he sank just past his knee. The jagged edges of wood ripped into the boot and tore his pants. He fell forward, feeling the wood bite skin through his boot and shred. The roof shingles were new, but the beams beneath weren't.

Across the alley, two men and jumped the gap. They barely made the jump and scrambled up the side after him. Jaylin ground his teeth and pulled his leg back up, feeling the splinters cut ribbons into his leg. Pain twisted inside him, but he wasn't free yet. He pulled again and the wood crunched and gave way. A bald fellow wearing studded gloves swung up on the roof and wavered, trying to get his balance. Jaylin hobbled forward and punched him square on the jaw. The bald man windmilled his arms and then he fell like a rock and struck the cobblestone with a crunch.

A fellow with gold earrings reached the top and slammed into Jaylin.

They both fell on the weak roof and it bulged beneath them, but it didn't give way. They fought and wrestled, twisting to win control of the other. Jaylin's head crashed against the roof shingles, and he heaved the other man off of him. He looked over, finding himself at the edge of the roof.

"Fall then!" the man yelled, his foot swinging back to kick Jaylin off.

With a motion he had practiced in Abyri and the Bright Well, Jaylin rolled off the roof, gripping the edge before he fell. The man's foot met nothing. Lurching forward, he tottered on the edge. Jaylin hoisted himself up with one arm and grabbing the man's leg and yanked on the cuff.

As the man fell screaming, Jaylin flipped back up on the roof. He was grateful the men with crossbows had not reloaded yet. Lady Minya's henchmen swarmed the building.

Keeping to the edge of the roof where the beams were the most secure, Jaylin stared once more at the blue-gray waters of the Semn. He backed up a little, then ran down the roof and jumped off Runner's Bridge.

* * *

A sickening, exhilarating feeling swept over Jaylin as he fell. The air rushed about his face and his stomach heaved. He yelled, unable to stop himself. The gray waters charged at him. A skiff with legion sheriffs just beneath the bridge came beneath him. He thought he would hit it, but it passed in front of him as he crashed into the waters of the Semn.

Air gushed from his lungs, and cold water soaked his clothes and boots. He fought for the surface. His body felt broken by the impact. Kicking to the surface, he gulped the air. Runner's Bridge spun overhead, getting farther away as the Semn shoved him down river. He flailed in the water for a moment, trying to turn himself around and then started swimming for the left bank. Fresh water filled his mouth, and he spat it out to breathe. The legion sheriffs from the skiff shouted at him, but the water in his ears drowned what they said. He fought the tug of the current carrying him to the rapids where the river met the sea.

The skiff turned broadside, trying to go against the current to reach him. Jaylin battled his heavy clothes and the weariness and pain draining him. He was closer to the Steene, to the salt-water depths of the ocean. There were cold-water sharks, he had heard. And his leg was bleeding.

Spurred by this, Jaylin kept kicking and swimming until his lungs nearly burst and his arms felt like wet ropes. His shoulders itched with fire and his legs trembled with exhaustion. Eventually, he reached the wall of the Tier of Minya, a sloping cement embankment designed to protect against the flooding. It was rough, granite-like cement, meant to withstand the constant beat of the waves. But there was no handhold, no dock. Above him about seven feet sat a clutch of sewer drains. The wall of the city rose even higher. How was he going to get inside?

Jaylin swam up to the edge of the sloping embankment. There was nothing to hold on to, so he drifted downriver, keeping near the embankment. His muscles cramped, and it was difficult breathing and thinking. The roar of the rapids grew louder and the waves carried him along quickly toward them. "There he is!" someone shouted. He bobbed a little and saw the legion sheriff skiff behind.

"Swim over here!" one shouted. "We'll save you, lad."

Jaylin didn't dare. He kicked off from the wall with the current, going faster and faster. The skiff with the sheriffs turned and followed the wave grooves after him. Taking a huge breath, Jaylin prepared to hit the seething point where the Semn churned into the sea.

The current whipped up suddenly, rapid water meeting the tide, and he was sucked under. Water threw and spun him, churning and pounding, the salt stinging his eyes. The churning noise in his ears blotted out everything else. Pain exploded in his back when he was thrown against the embankment by a rippling tide wave. He broke the surface once, just long enough to taste air again, and then he was dragged from the embankment and thrown against it. Twice, three times – he thought he was going to die. He blacked out.

The waves calmed. Jaylin popped up, gasping and choking. He retched the salt water he had swallowed. The waters calmed but were choked with filth. The sea gave off a stench he could hardly breathe. All the sewers in Minya dumped into this point. The air tasted better than the waters.

The smell of the wharf, of rotting wood and dyed cloth, pungent and sharp, met him. He remembered the smells from his first day in Minya. Dry Dock.

"By the Veil, you're alive, lad?" shouted someone.

Jaylin could hardly move, but he flopped himself over to look. A small fishing boat nestled in the calm stinking water about a hundred paces from him. A grubby fisherman stood holding his fraying nets and looked concerned.

"Thought…though you were another dead one. Be right there!" The man sat down and reached for the paddles, starting to row toward him. When he approached, he helped Jaylin board.

Jaylin shivered and his stomach clenched again, but there was nothing left to vomit. He barely had enough strength to breathe. The man reached into a sack in the bottom of the boat and handed him a thick green-gray shirt. "Here you're quiverin' like a fish, better put this on."

Jaylin nodded, feeling the water drip from his chin. After peeling off his sodden shirt, he fit himself into the new one. It was warm and dry, and helped heat him. "Who…are...you?"

The fisherman smiled and patted his leg. "I'm Brek. I save those of you who survive the Rush."

"What?" Jaylin asked, wiggling his finger in his ear.

"You survived the Rush. Most don't, I'm afraid. Drown at the bottom. You're one of the lucky ones though. Only one circle," he said, nodding at Jaylin's shoulder. "Take my advice, son. Whatever you did in there," he nodded toward the Tier of Minya, "It wasn't worth the trip in the sewers now was it?"

Jaylin understood. The fisherman, Brek, thought he had escaped from the sewers into the sea. He smiled, couldn't even help it.

"You are right. Nothing is worth…a trip to the sewers," he said, still shivering.

Brek nodded. "It's bad enough they throw you in for snitchin' a crust of bread…" He sighed. "I just try to help where I can. I'll get you some new clothes, try to find you a job if you want. All I ask if that you pay me back when you've earned a few extra dyx, that's all." He started rowing back to the docks. The man had grime in his wrinkles and pores, so his age was indeterminable. The boat had leaks, but the man had honest eyes, and Jaylin was grateful not to be swimming in the murky bay water.

"Thank you, Brek. I hope this doesn't get you into any trouble."

The fisherman rolled up his sleeve. There were two circles set on the triangle. "I understand, just be sure of that. I also know how tough it can be getting fresh out, too. The fish like eating from the sewers. Lots of fish. Cold-water sharks too. Mostly bottom feeders." He rowed back to the most western dock.

Dozens of other fishing boats crowded the dingy pier. Brek led him to a little shack along the cloth warehouses and into his living dwelling. It was a pit, but Brek smiled as if it were a mansion. He was missing half of his teeth.

"I've got some pants, some new boots if you want 'em." He tossed Jaylin a set of clothes, a bleached green color.

Jaylin looked down at his shredded boot. The bleeding had stopped and the wounds weren't as deep as he had first feared. But the pockets had been shredded and waterlogged.

He stared at the ruined boot, but was very grateful to Aster or the Fates – whichever – had led him to put Kalisha's note in his other boot instead. He checked it, found it damp but not smeared. He silently thanked Jevin for the special Espion boots.

"You know, Brek, I like my boots fine. I think they'll still work." Jaylin changed the rest of his clothes and ate cold fish and sticky clumps of rice. A blunt pain throbbed in his skull, and he fought it back. His entire body ached. He remembered being slammed against the embankment several times and winced.

"You okay?" Brek asked, patting his shoulder.

Jaylin nodded. "I'll be fine." It helped to be dry again, and he felt his energy returning. "Thank you, Brek. I owe you for this."

"You want a job on the docks? Looks like you got a strong back. You'll need money, lad. If you want to survive here. You need dyx if you want to stay."

"I've got a job if I can just get there. I'll pay you back for your help. I promise."

"Well that's nice to hear. See that you do, boy. See that you do."

They clasped hands, and Jaylin wandered out into the maze of docks. He recognized where he was. Just past the alley of makeshift homes sat the depot containing skiffs heading out to the Steene. He remembered it from when he met Carshalton. It would be easy reaching the Bright Well, unless, of course, Lady Minya's henchmen were waiting for him there as well.

He had to expect that they were.

* * *

Keeping to the side streets, Jaylin walked as fast as his strength allowed him. His drab clothes made him blend in with the rank-smelling lopsided buildings that crowded the entire Tier. Debris and barricades choked some of the side alleys – rat droppings everywhere.

The note Prince Jevin had written was destroyed, so smeared and wet that Jaylin tossed it away. When he spotted a company of legion sheriffs, he avoided them by choosing another alley. He didn't know who was watching him, if anyone. He had left the Tier of Aster early in the morning. It had taken most of the day to cross that Tier to Runner's Bridge. The sun had begun to set, and he still hadn't reached the Bright Well.

Jaylin worried, knowing he couldn't afford to be out after Curfew, yet longing for the safety he hoped he would find there. If Reonna would help him.

Despite the pain in his knees, Jaylin started jogging. He knew it would make him stand out more, but he had to hurry or he'd never make it there. His leg muscles ached from the hard swim against the Semn, and his lungs were like split bags of wheat corns. Shadows distorted the view ahead.

He had never been so exhausted.

Images flitted through his mind as he ran, flashing and darting like juneflies in the summer. Atabyrion. Thasos. Etayne. Jevin. He felt the city beneath him, as if it were breathing. As if *she* were breathing. Minya was more than a City, she was an identity, something that took a person in, changed them. They were never the same afterwards. The cobbles felt softer, the wind a gentle whisper. Jaylin pitched forward and collapsed, but it didn't hurt. He fell into Minya's soothing palm, cradled like her child. Sleep crowded his mind.

Jaylin fought against the fatigue and crawled forward, feeling the light drain from the sky. How long before Curfew sounded? An hour? If that? His legs couldn't support his weight, but he pushed himself forward. He was near the Bright Well – he recognized the streets now, even in the dark. He was part of it, part of the cobblestones, the sewer grates, and slanting roofs. Someone entered the alley ahead of him. A legion sheriff? No, not this close, he prayed.

It was Ethen.

"By the Veil," the Espion said, crouching down on the road. "Aster's Veil, Jaylin?"

"Ethen," Jaylin whispered, his tongue thick in his mouth, "I never thought I'd say this, but yours is the most beautiful face I think I've ever seen! What are you doing here?"

"I'm on my way back to the Bright Well. I just came from Runners Bridge. I heard some sheriffs talking about you. Well, they described you close enough. Did you truly jump off Runner's Bridge,

lad?" He shook his head. "Look at you, why am I even asking!"

Jaylin tried to stand, and Ethen helped support him.

"Any trouble at the Bright Well, Ethen?"

"I've been away all day, but we're on full alert. I was about to head north to join the King's Will when Thasos came and warned us about you."

"Thank Aster," Jaylin sighed. "He made it out of there alive."

"Barely, from what we could tell."

Around the corner, Jaylin saw the Bright Well ahead and its inviting lights. The Curfew bells rang. Jaylin wanted to sob with relief.

Ethen hoisted Jaylin up a little. "He was set on by the men who burned the Sutton, but he fought his way clear and told us about Lady Minya's trap. He feared you were dead, though wasn't certain. The flames of that place burned for two days. Thasos asked the Espion to excavate it, to confirm whether you lived. Or not."

"I need to see him," Jaylin said.

"Why? He's the Queen's man, not ours. He went north to join the King's Will. It is meeting right now in Premye."

"You let him go alone?"

"No, I sent six Espion to trail him to make sure he arrived safely. Word on the street is that the Mark of Alvaron is paying two thousand dyx for either of you."

"Does Jevin think I'm dead?"

"Who knows what Jevin thinks? We haven't heard yet how the King's Will has started. Jevin has no witnesses, so I doubt he'll accuse the Mark publicly. I'm sure he's told Davin-Noll about what he did to you."

They approached the glowing steps, and Jaylin relaxed for the first time in five days. The common room was half-empty, but he imagined many of the Espion were off north at the palace. He squeezed Ethen's shoulder as the Espion helped him into a chair. "It would have taken me an hour to crawl this far," he said in a soft voice. "Thank you, Ethen."

The Espion shrugged and stepped back. He cocked his head. "Did you…find her?"

"Kalisha?"

"Who else would I be talking about!"

Jaylin nodded. "That's why I need to get to the King's Will. And that's why half of Minya is trying to stop me. When did Thasos leave?"

"Two days ago. He was still healing from some wounds, but determined to make it back for the King's Will before it started. I'm assuming then that you will need to see Jevin as well."

"I'll leave first thing in the morning."

"Oh, not without me," Ethen said. "And an Espion guard. You're too dangerous to have loose in the streets. You're likely to cause a riot all by yourself."

Jaylin smiled. "Then you can be my ticket back into the Tier of Premye since I don't have a ring. I'm hoping to start a riot, Ethen. And you can be there when Alvaron falls. If you thought Advent was impressive..."

Reonna noticed them at the table, and she rushed over. "Look at you!" she said. "You smell worse than the wharves. Are you all right?"

"I am now."

* * *

"Wake up, Jaylin. Jaylin, wake up! Something's wrong."

He awoke with a start, feeling his muscles and limbs ache. He hurt all over. The sky was still dark, the room thick with shadows. Reonna helped him sit up. For a moment, he forgot where he was.

Ethen appeared up the steps. "The Bright Well is surrounded," he said acidly. "We're moving you, come on."

"What?" Jaylin asked. He felt tangled by the blankets. "Legion sheriffs?"

Ethen shook his head. "I should have thought of this," he muttered. "Half of the Espion here is already up at the King's Will. I sent another retinue with Thasos. This is Lady Minya's work. She knows we don't have enough men. She's coming for you, Jaylin. Last word in is that she controls the streets in each way. She has the neighborhood secured, and she's moving in with her legion sheriff lackeys." He chewed on his lip. "You made one serious first impression on her."

"How long before they break in?"

"Break in? They don't have to. No matter which direction we try to take you, there's a trap ready to be sprung. If we wait in here, they can set fire to the place. The windows are all secured, but this is a large building, and I don't have enough Espion to withstand a siege right now."

"You said you were going to move me. How then?"

"I have enough men and crossbows to pierce the line. We'll have to move quickly."

"She'll be expecting that." Jaylin slid off the bed and went to the window. He parted it just enough to peek through. He saw a lone man at the corner, keeping an eye on the Bright Well. "She's nothing if not persistent. There goes the way across the roof." He glanced over at Ethen. "Is there a cellar here?"

"You've been drinking mead like a fish, haven't you?"

"Good. Does it lead into the sewers?"

Ethen gaped. "Of…of course it does. The Bright Well was built over a sewer entrance. But you're not suggesting..."

"Would Lady Minya have it guarded?"

"You're not serious!"

Jaylin sighed. "If there's a sewer tunnel under here, it gives us the perfect opportunity to slip out from underneath her."

"But the tunnels are filthy, diseased. We'd hardly make a mile..."

"That's the furthest we would need to go, Ethen. Just to another access shaft. We can have someone unlock it for us from above and drop us a rope. Just past the ring of sheriffs. They're looking for me. Remember? Are they going to tail every Espion who leaves?"

"Probably."

"Then send all the girls out. Each a different direction. They'll wait by the nearest sewer grate and get ready to help break it open. We just need to get past this blockade. Now, I want a sword, some rope, a few torches and even a bucket shield – the ones the sheriffs use for riots. I imagine it won't be friendly down there."

Ethen's expression showed his struggle. "You are mad. But I guess that's why you're still alive. We use the sewer opening to drop certain people down, if you know what I mean. I never thought, never suspected I'd be jumping in myself…voluntarily." He sighed. "I think four of us should go down there. It's bound to get messy. What do you think?"

"I'm more than happy to have a little company. Though you'll undoubtedly regret it. Reonna, I want you to go north. Spread the word to the other girls, but I'll be looking for you."

She nodded. "Which way will you go?"

Jaylin turned to Ethen.

"The sewer main runs northeast, southwest," Ethen said, "dumping on each side of the docks. Just find the nearest dumping fork beyond the walls into Median. Get there quickly, Reonna, because I don't want to be trapped down there very long."

"Neither do I," Jaylin said. "Ethen, you pick the men to go with us. Get us weapons and rope." He paused, thinking. "Do we have any garlic? Something strong to help deal with the smell?"

"Nothing will help with the smell," Ethen said. "Not even a bath in quicklime."

"They're coming," Reonna said, holding up her hand. They fell quiet and Jaylin heard it too, the firm marching of boots coming down the road. The three went to the window and peered out. Down the street, heading toward the Bright Well, came a company of legion sheriffs holding torches. They were being led by Captain Halesowen.

Jaylin shook his head and muttered a curse. "Aster's wrath, we need to go!"

Ethen scowled as he looked outside. "Halesowen. I thought I smelled something rank. We'd best hurry."

"Bolt the front door to buy some time. Reonna, get out through the back. Tell the girls to run. I hope they won't hurt you."

"They wouldn't dare!" Ethen growled.

Jaylin held up his finger. "You don't know that. Get moving."

The three hurried down the stairwell, and Ethen whistled for the Espion to gather around him. At the foot of the stairs, he ordered the Espion to assemble. "Trig and Pall, hold the front door. Wess, Corondin, and Riveyra -- you're coming with us. Pack short swords, rope and food. Meet us down in the cellar. Move! Halesowen is coming, there isn't much time." Ethen turned to another Espion. "Tannay, we're going out through the sewers...don't look at me like that! We need every sewer grate within a mile of here with your girls waiting to pull us up. We're going straight to Jevin when we break free. Hold Halesowen off until we're gone."

"One more thing," Jaylin added. "Feel free to take a shot at Halesowen with a crossbow if the opportunity arises." He smiled grimly. "And blame it on me. Just give us time. Try to ward off the stairs, as if we've fled up there. That should detour them."

"Here he comes!" Trig shouted from the door.

"Go!" Ethen barked, shoving Jaylin toward the back kitchen. Reonna grabbed a cloak from a hook.

The front door shuddered on its hinges. "Open up!" a sheriff roared. The pounding increased.

Jaylin met Ethen and the other three Espion in the kitchen. The front door splintered. One of the three Espion knelt on the floor and pulled open the hatch leading to the cellar. The smell of musty kegs greeted them. One Espion held four short swords, the other a long coiled rope.

Jaylin went to the edge, but Reonna caught his sleeve. "Good luck," she whispered and surprised him with a quick kiss on the mouth.

He blinked and gave her a wink before following Ethen down an inclined ladder. Dropping into the dark cellar, the last Espion shut the trapdoor over them. At the bottom, Ethen looked them over.

Wess was a small man with gray eyes and a nervous smile. His dark hair was cropped very close. Riveyra was Jaylin's height and the Atabyrion remembered him from his first night at the Bright Well. Corondin had a scar on the left side of his face and had a gold-flecked goatee. His eyes were as feral as a wolf's.

"Wess, open the grate to the sewers. Riveyra, light four torches, but grab a few extra as reserves. Corondin, you hold the staircase until we're down. Move!"

Jaylin followed Ethen amidst the kegs of mead and wine and the huge sacks of flour, beans, and other stores. He touched a lever and the wall swung on a soundless hinge. Beyond it were torches and a single sentry guarding what looked like a twin row of cells. The sentry had gray-streaked hair and an unkempt beard.

"Problems upstairs, Regin," Ethen said. "Get up top to help out. Things will get ugly."

"Give me the keys," Wess demanded. The sentry obliged. In the third cell on the right, they found the sewer entrance. A rank and fetid smell rose from it, and Jaylin turned his head, reminded of the smell he had experienced early on in his stay in Minya. His shoulder shared the memory. Riveyra approached with burning torches and handed one to each of them.

Wess knelt down and unlocked the grate. He lifted it up and looked up at Ethen. "Who's first?"

Ethen looked at Jaylin and then growled, "I am. Give me a sword." He took the short sword, wrapped his arm around the rope, and then held the torch in his left. "Lower me down."

The three of them did. Jaylin watched him descend into the black sewage ducts and heard his boots splash in the muck. Ethen looked up at them, holding out the torch to see better. His face wrinkled with the strong odor. "It's awful down here. I hope the torch doesn't flame anything. Riveyra, get down here. Wess, go get Corondin."

Jaylin and the sentry lowered Riveyra down. He looked edgy but excited and followed Ethen down the shaft. Moans came from the tunnels below, echoing through the rounded walls. Jaylin shuddered. Wess returned with Corondin.

"Wess, you next. Then Jaylin. Corondin bring in the rear and Regin – you shut us down here and lock it. Hurry now, I want to get this over with."

When it was Jaylin's turn, he felt the scab on his cheek itch, and the miasma of the sewers engulfed him. He wanted to retch, but he breathed through his mouth and gripped the short sword. Finally, all four Espion landed below and Regin dropped the rope after them. Wess caught it and quickly bundled it around his arm.

"Awful stench," Wess said, wincing.

The torches hissed and sputtered and Ethen peered down the dark tunnels, both directions. If the sewers weren't flooded weekly, Jaylin surmised, their torches might have sparked off fireballs.

"Riveyra, stay up front with me. Corondin and Wess, you've got our backs. Jaylin –be smart and stay in between. Watch the footing because there's hock everywhere and it's easy to slip in. The center of the tunnel is deeper than the sides, so stay to one side or the other. Listen sharp and follow me." He glanced over at Jaylin and scowled. "I don't know how I let you talk me into this. We could all die."

"You've always wanted to visit the sewers, Ethen. Admit it."

Ethen led them down the tunnel, the direction he thought was north. Their boots sloshed in the spoiled debris and the heat and bad air made it stifling. Sweat trickled down their faces. A scream lingered in the air, an echo running and fading through the rounded halls. The sewers were alive. Black roaches clung to floating clumps of feces, and huge sewer rats, three feet long, brushed up against their boots. Their brown wet fur blended with the sewage. Jaylin felt one bite at his boots, as did the others, and they swept down with their short swords, hacking and cutting at the beasts. His skin crawled.

"Hold up," Ethen ordered, stopping suddenly.

There was a faint moaning ahead in the tunnel. "The light...the light...here it comes! The light!"

A body ravaged by disease and sickness crouched against the sewer wall, his legs and arms gnawed to the bone. Jaylin's stomach revolted.

"The light...the light! Aster comes! The light!" The man's face was a mess of pain and scabs. Dark insects swarmed his open decaying wounds.

Ethen stepped forward and cut off the man's head in a fluid sweep.

"He was right about that," he muttered to the others. No one laughed.

Onward they pressed, moving as quickly as they dared into the oppressive blackness. Not certain how deeply they went, they finally discovered a sewer grate above them. It was at the intersection of another tunnel, combining with four shafts that led in other directions. Ethen held his torch away and gazed up at it. The moonlight through the iron slits painted stripes on his face.

"How far are we from the Bright Well?" Jaylin asked, shivering despite the muggy air.

"A hundred paces, if that. Should we...?"

His voice trailed off. From the tunnel behind them came the sound of boots sloshing in the water. Wess and Corondin thrust their torches out, and what Jaylin saw sent tremors of fear down through his boots. The tunnel was clogged with a mob of men, encrusted with filth, holding broken blades and clubs as they advanced. Hate glinted in their eyes. Many were naked, slashed and bleeding. All had brands on their shoulders, some with two circles, some only with one. None with three.

"Aster help us," Riveyra whispered, holding out his short sword.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN
Sewer Tunnels, Tier of Minya

Jaylin stared down the tunnel as the filthy mob approached, shielding their eyes from the torchlight. They had lost any semblance of civilization. Tattered clothes covered some, while others stalked naked. Sores and bleeding scabs festered their skin. Some had tangled beards down to their bellies and long coiled hair. Guttural voices murmured and snarled at the small group from the Bright Well.

"Well, Ethen," Jaylin said, gritting his teeth. "Do we hold them off and hope someone comes soon, or do we run?"

The Espion shook his head. "We need to give Reonna time to get here. How long could we hold them off?"

Jaylin shrugged. "They don't appear to be in good shape. Or maybe we should try talking our way out?"

"With them?" He spat in the swirling sewer water at his feet. "They're carrion, Jaylin. Carrion. And they'd kill us for our shirts."

The carrion attacked.

With a rush and a roar, the men of the sewers launched through the tunnel at the five Espion. They scrambled forward, trying to tear down the torch-bearing intruders with their hands. The murky sewer water splashed and churned.

"Wess! Corondin! Hold the tunnel, don't let them swarm in here!" Ethen's voice throbbed with fear.

The two Espion, bearing torches in one hand and short swords in the other, waited the rush. Moans and screams filled the tunnels as the two Espion cut and slashed at the attacking men, the steel weapons whistling before crunching into weak bone and tattered flesh. The sewer men of Minya died, collapsing and falling to the murky sludge. The group from behind pressed harder, and bodies fell over bodies. The force of the rush drove the two Espion back a few steps.

"Too many," Ethen said, scowling. "We'd better fall back, head to another opening. Wess, Corondin! Hold them here and wait until we're gone. Then fall back and run."

"Very well!" Wess acknowledged. Parrying the hands that swept like claws, trying to drag them down, the Espion battled their way free and retreated.

"Let's move," Ethen ordered, beckoning them farther down the same passage aisle they had been on. "Come on, Jaylin. We're going to be down here a while!"

Jaylin nodded. They broke into a light run, listening to the debris kick and splash around them. Sewer rats squirmed beneath, nearly tripping him. Jaylin looked at Ethen. "Out of curiosity, how well do you know your way around here? Because if we don't get out, it's a nasty swim back. Trust me, I know."

Ethen grunted. "I barely know we're heading north. The Espion doesn't usually dance in the sewers, Jaylin. This is only the second time I've come down here."

"I was afraid you'd say that," Jaylin sighed.

"Don't panic yet, Atabyrion. I've studied up on the sewer system in these two Tiers, just in case I was ever thrown in. If we don't find Reonna or the others, I believe I can lead us to an exit gate. Maybe."

"How reassuring."

About fifty paces down the tunnel, they arrived at a thick iron grate. Filth and debris choked the bottom, acting as a filter for the larger objects draining downstream.

"By the bloody Veil," Ethen muttered. "I should have guessed this."

From behind, Wess and Corondin left their positions and retreated back through the sewers in order to follow them. Shouts and cries of the sewer men echoed through the shafts, spilling into the box-shaped room.

"Any way through?" Jaylin asked, gripping the rusted iron bars. They rattled.

Ethen stepped back. He lunged forward, kicking the grate. It rattled and shook. Ethen kicked again, and again, raining blows on the twisted metal. The hinges, so rusty and worn, snapped after the fifth blow and the gate tottered open. Ethen rubbed his knee and then pushed the grate open. "This must be the divider," he said. "Between Minya and Median."

"Better to go north," Jaylin said. He turned to Ethen and cocked his head. "Do you think Jevin will ask us to wipe our boots before coming into the King's Will?"

"How can you joke about this!?"

"If I don't joke about it, I'm going to retch over you. I know my jokes are bad, but they're better than vomit."

"Don't be too sure of that," Ethen jabbed. "Keep going."

Wess and Corondin approached, sweating. "There's a stinking army of them," Wess complained, holding his side. "A few are starting to eat the dead."

"And they want our weapons," Corondin said blandly. He had a stern face, a wolf's eyes. "They don't care whether they live or die. They just want our swords."

Ethen nodded. "Riveyra, take Wess' place and form a rearguard. Wess, I want you scouting on ahead. Yell if you find anything. Now go, I want out of this place!"

Wess darted ahead, his torchlight fading down the shaft tunnel walls. Ethen and Jaylin followed, pressing ahead. Behind them they heard the echoes of the moans and shrieks of the sewer men following them. His stomach lurching, Jaylin jogged after Wess, watching the torch light bounce. Was Reonna far behind them, or was she ahead of them by now? He ground his teeth, trying not to think about the smell. His stomach twisted with nausea and nearly revolted.

Wess screamed and the light from his torch vanished.

* * *

"Well, we can't go back. Ethen," Jaylin said. "You come with me, carefully. Riveyra, keep a close watch on our backs."

Wess' voice guttered out, and they heard splashing and kicking in the murky water ahead. Jaylin and Ethen advanced. Riveyra followed behind. At the tunnel junction, they saw another grate above. It was still nighttime beyond, offering no light. Thrusting their torches forward, they found Wess thrashing in a thick pool of sludge. He broke the surface, covered head to foot in filth. His side was bleeding. "Where's my sword!" he said, coughing and groping around the pool for it. "Someone jumped me." He stopped and brought up the torch stick he had carried. "Curse it, where did it go!"

Ethen sighed. "Wess, quit that! What happened?"

The young Espion turned, wiping his face. He grimaced. "I feel awful. Someone cut me," he held his ribs. "Then threw me face down into this." He kicked the water. "I dropped my sword."

The box-shaped room had tunnels leading in every direction, two sloping downstream, two sloping up. The heavier sludge settled to the bottom of the box, kicked up by Wess' movements.

"Riveyra, look down that corridor," Ethen ordered. "Jaylin, you take that one. Keep your guard up!"

Jaylin nodded and looked down one of the side tunnels. The light from his torch glared off the walls, plunging the shadows deeper into its throat. A man charged him like a wildcat, holding Wess' short sword.

"Aster damn you!" the man hissed, arcing the sword down. Jaylin scrambled back, deflecting the blow. The man's garments were soiled with muck and nearly black, but Jaylin recognized the tabard he wore – a tabard of the Mark of Alvaron. The sentry captain's short sword came down again, blocked once more by Jaylin. But his charge was too forceful and Jaylin staggered back. His mind was spinning.

"Remember who did this to you!" the man seethed with rage. He coughed and choked, his eyes fevered and sick. "Remember who did this to you!" The sword came again and again, driving harder and harder with a hating fury.

Alvaron's sentry captain! Jaylin barely recognized him. "Ethen!" The blade crashed against Jaylin's again, and he gave way, certain the man's charge would slacken. He used the parrying methods that Thasos had taught him, but that was with a highlander, not a Minyan short sword.

The Espion advanced, offering another target. "You want my weapon too, dog? You want a little taste of this?"

The sentry captain's face twisted with hate and he slashed at him. But Ethen was better skilled than Jaylin and defended the blows.

"Didn't the Mark's men teach you better than that? Too busy supping and yawning? Come on, you rake." Ethen's taunts provoked the man further.

Jaylin enjoyed the exchange, but then he remembered. There were two of Jorganon's men down there. He glanced back, saw Riveyra treating Wess' wound. But from the opposite tunnel behind them, he saw the other sentry creeping forward, eyes locked on Riveyra's weapon.

"Riveyra behind you!"

The Espion spun around but was hit. Both plunged into the murky waters. They struggled with each other for control of the sword. Jaylin swore and then he felt pain shoot into his skull from a glancing blow.

"Jaylin! Pay attention!" Ethen snapped. The sentry captain cackled. Jaylin felt his head and looked at his fingers. Blood. Not serious, but he felt the pain shooting through his skin and the blood soak his hair.

"I want him down!" Jaylin yelled. "Take him down, Ethen!"

The sentry captain withdrew. He backed down the sewer tunnel, wheezing. "I hate you! Come after me, Espion! Come to my kingdom!" He coughed, doubling over. "I rule below. Come after me, Espion!" He had only been in the sewers a week and he was already mad.

Jaylin glanced back at Riveyra. He was neck deep in sewage, but he kicked the other sentry back and drew his sword. The torchlight glimmered off its filthy blade as it arced down and cut into the man. He let out a death scream that shook to the bone.

"What's going on down there?" Corondin yelled.

"Alvaron's men!" Ethen called back. "Keep holding them back there." He looked up at the grate, and then at the sentry captain. "You want him down?"

"I want his signet ring, Ethen. Bring him down."

Riveyra sliced again as the sentry's scream faded into a distant echo. "Down," he announced.

There was a whisper from above. "Jaylin!"

Jaylin's heart swelled. "Reonna!" He stepped over and looked up the grate lid. Raising the light, he saw her brown eyes blink down at him. The closeness of the tunnels seemed to swallow him.

"Can you wait there, Jaylin? I need to find a legion sheriff to open this up."

Corondin's shadow backed against the wall of the sewer shaft. "Riveyra, get back here! I can't hold them off on my own."

"Reonna, wait!" Jaylin said. "Don't get the sheriffs! Ethen, forget him. Stay here and cover me.

Riveyra, get the signet ring from the guard, and anything else that looks important."

Riveyra searched the body. "He doesn't have a signet ring."

That's right, Jaylin thought. The sentry captain was probably the one who had it.

"Forget him then," Jaylin snapped. "Get back and help Corondin. Now!"

Riveyra rushed down the tunnel.

"It's about time," the other Espion snorted. "Jaylin, they're starting to thin out...nope, there's another group. There must be a thousand men down here!"

"Reonna," Jaylin said, looking up at her. "I don't trust the sheriffs. They could be Lady Minya's men. Look close by you. Is there a pole, beam, log, anything we can use as a pulley?"

"There's the Statue of Justice right here. Looks smooth, like bronze or iron. Will that do?"

"Yes!" Jaylin beamed. He withdrew a coil of rope and dunked it into the muck to soak it. "Now I want you to catch this rope I toss you. Put your hand through the grate slits...ready? Now catch!"

Reonna's thin wrists helped her squeeze through. Jaylin tossed the coil of rope right into her grasp. She caught it on the first try.

"Oh, I adore you, lass!" Jaylin said, exalted. "Now tie one end, very strongly, to the grate bars. Several loops, it needs to be secure. Then take the rope around the statue and drop the other end down here. Wess, you're going to help me."

Reonna unwound the rope coil and worked furiously. She glanced up. "Curfew patrol," she whispered. "Keep it quiet down there. I don't think they can see me." She tied the rope off at the grate bar. "I hope this holds...better loop it around one more time. I'm bringing it around the statue." She disappeared for a moment and then slid the rope end through the slits and dropped it down.

Jaylin caught it. Corondin and Riveyra were about thirty paces away, hacking at their pursuers, keeping the wall of sewer men at bay. Both were wounded and retreated slowly toward the others. Ethen stood near, keeping his eye on the sentry captain who lingered in the tunnel, watching them.

"Grab hold, Wess," Jaylin ordered. There was no place to put the torch, so he dropped it. It hissed as it submerged, thickening the darkness around them. Sounds filled his ears as he lost sight. How many other sewer men were there? Would they come from other directions too? Only Ethen and Corondin had torches. "Pull!" he yelled.

The two young men yanked on the rope, feeling it tighten and strain. The grate rumbled, but held. "Pull!"

"You need more arms," Ethen snapped. He positioned himself to block the sentry captain. "Riveyra, fall back to help pull!"

"I can't!" Riveyra called. "They're too thick down here! We could use someone else ourselves!"

"Jaylin," Reonna called. "The lock bulges when you pull. If I had something to pry it with, I could help."

"What's around you?"

"Nothing. But with a lever, I could."

Jaylin and Ethen looked at each other. "Your sword," Ethen suggested.

"Good idea. Reonna, I'm tying it around this end. Pull it up!" Winding the blade's hilt around a simple knot, he let go and Reonna pulled it up through the slit. She dropped the rope back down and then slid the blade's tip beneath the lock.

"Try again," she whispered. "Hurry, they're coming this way!"

Jaylin and Wess pulled again, feeling their muscles twist in their arms and start to burn. They put their whole weight into it and heard the bar groan. Reonna dug the sword beneath the lock bracket. The metal creaked and then snapped. The grate lid flew upwards and landed on the

cobblestones, clattering like a bell.

"Outside!" the sentry captain shrieked, charging Ethen like a rabid wolf. The Espion fought him back, cutting him with several skilled slashes, but he was crazed beyond pain. "Outside! Outside!"

Reonna stopped the grate lid clattering on the cobblestones and lifted it. She wound it around the statue twice, cinching it off. "They're coming! Climb up!"

"Jaylin first!" Ethen barked. "Wess, help him!"

The young Espion locked his fingers together, offering them as a stirrup. Jaylin stepped in and leapt up, pulling himself up the rope. Reonna bent down, offering her hand. Jaylin grabbed it and she helped pull him free. Their eyes met, and he gave her a wink. From down the street, the legion sheriffs charged at them.

"Wess, get up here!" Jaylin ordered. The young Espion was already following hand-over-hand up the rope. He surfaced next, bedraggled with sewer filth. His short spiky hair was matted down. Jaylin heard Ethen fighting the captain, saw the torchlight suddenly douse and disappear.

"Ethen!" Jaylin shouted.

There was a groan of pain in the darkness below, then a quick, hacking sound. Ethen appeared below, looking up. He threw something up through the hole – the sentry captain's hand, on whose finger was a tarnished signet ring. "Corondin and Riveyra, run! We've got it open!"

Ethen jumped up on the rope, and Wess and Jaylin pulled him out. They dropped the line down again. The last two Espion were panting when they reached the rope. "Riveyra, up!" Jaylin ordered. "Corondin, cover him!"

The approaching sewer men rushed through the passageway, charging at the last two Espion. Jaylin realized with horror that once one of them was up, the other might not have the chance. Over his shoulder, he saw the Curfew officers running toward them, blowing their whistles. "Ethen, take care of those guards," Jaylin rasped. "You're Espion, they shouldn't stop you! If we have to run, let me know." He looked down into the sewers. "Corondin! Wrap a wrist around the end of the rope. As soon as Riveyra is up, we'll pull you out."

Corondin nodded. He found the end of the rope. "Get going, Riveyra! I'll hold them!" He threw the torch into the advancing rabble. Darkness plunged the sewer depths. Jaylin and Wess felt a heavy weight on the rope.

"It's going to be close," Jaylin said through clenched teeth. "Keep your arms free and swinging."

While Riveyra climbed up, Jaylin tried to twist off the ring with the signet of Alvaron on it. The flesh had swollen around it. Reonna handed him the short sword, and he quickly cut off the finger and pulled the ring off. He dumped the bloody stump back down, sickened by the knowledge of what the sewer men would do with it.

Riveyra grabbed the sewer edge and sprung free, sweating and cursing. "Now, pull him out!" Jaylin ordered. The three of them grabbed the rope and pulled.

"Waaarrghhh!!" Corondin screamed and the rope went taut. The sewer men grabbed him from below. "Pull me out, pull me out!!"

The three dug their boots into the cobble edges and pulled. They could hear the sound of shredding clothes.

"Corondin!" Riveyra yelled. "Fight them off!"

His screams turned from fright into pain. The thin film of moonlight revealed a mass of men filling the tunnel crossroads below. They clawed down Corondin, disarming him and then butchered him. The tug on the rope nearly brought all three of them down.

"In the name of Prince Jevin stop!" Ethen called. The two legion sheriffs ran up and attacked him with their truncheons. He dodged the blows and his short sword flashed wickedly.

"It's too late," Reonna said. "Drop the rope! Cover the tunnel!"

"Hate and fire!" Jaylin shouted, filled with rage. He watched Corondin get buried beneath the teeming mass. "Curse it! Riveryra, Wess, join Ethen. Reonna cut..."

She was already moving. Using Jaylin's short sword, she sliced through the rope and the frayed end jerked into the darkness. The two Espion followed after Ethen and the three of them faced off with the legion sheriffs, no words exchanged, no showing of Espion rings or bargains.

The three Espion whirled like spinning scythes, piercing hauberk and bone, jabs and cuts and feet kicking into knees. Jaylin watched it happen effortlessly, the skill of the sheriffs outmatched, until both were left in crumpled, bleeding heaps on the cobblestones.

Jaylin rolled the sewer grate over and closed the opening. He heard the screams down below, and his blood recoiled. Reonna laid a hand on his shoulder. "Hurry Jaylin," she whispered. "We need to get you to Premye."

Jaylin rose. "Reonna, you're coming…"

"I'm coming with you," she interrupted.

Ethen and Riveyra dragged the bodies of the legion sheriffs over to the grate and stacked them there to weigh it down.

"That should help hold it down until the other officers respond to the whistles," Riveyra said. "We'd better be half-way across the Tier before they do!"

"Wait," Jaylin cautioned. "The Espion stables. Aren't they at the Median gates?"

"They are," Reonna confirmed, "But I passed sheriffs and Lady Minya's henchmen along the way. We need to keep moving north."

Ethen brushed his arm. "Reonna's right. Besides, horses would be too obvious. Riveyra, you're from Median aren't you?"

"Yes." He glanced down at the sewer tunnel and shuddered. "Want me to lead?"

"Take us off all the main Curfew routes. Wess, you bring up the rear. Jaylin and Reonna, stick with me. Attacking my safehouse during the King's Will. Lost Corondin and how many others at the Bright Well." Ethen glowered. "Aster *burn* me before I'll let that flaxen doxy stop us. Move!"

* * *

The first hint of lavender touched the sky. Reonna clung to Jaylin's arm as they walked. He wasn't sure whether she needed comfort, or whether she was trying to keep him on his feet. Ethen glanced at every alley crossroad. The sounds and smells of the sewers faded away like morning mist, though it clung to their clothes. Over and over, Jaylin remembered Corondin. He dug his fingernails into his palms to forget the sight. It had happened so fast, arbitrarily. Jaylin had given the order for Riveyra to come up first. The other had died as the result. It wasn't fair. But then, the Fates never were. The moon always rises, he thought to himself, as with taxes and the tide. And death comes to us all sooner or later.

Jaylin heard whistles in the distance and knew that legion sheriffs would be searching for them, but Riveyra seemed to know where he was going. The Tier of Median sprawled through quiet neighborhoods sheathed in darkness. Once they ran across a set of Curfew officers, but Ethen's Espion ring allowed them to pass, unquestioned. By mid-morning, they reached the walls of Premye, approaching from the east. Jaylin's exhaustion weighed on his shoulders. They paused behind a well-kept park, sheltered by a screen of trees while they studied the side gate leading into Premye. It was

heavily guarded, and from the distance, they spied the tabard of the Mark of Alvaron.

"The back door is guarded," Ethen said slyly. "I keep forgetting that Lady Minya knows all the Espion routes. Any thoughts?" He deferred to Jaylin. "Of course, the last time I asked that we ended up in the sewers."

Jaylin hunched down and rubbed his hands together. They were close to their destination, and he had no patience left. "We have a few options. First, there's the direct approach. We can go over to the main gate where there should be some of the King's Guard. We'd have a better chance passing through them."

"You can bet Jorganon is watching it though," Ethen said. "They'd let us in, but I'm sure we wouldn't get far before being ambushed."

"What if we went later in the day when the traffic increases?"

Ethen thought a moment. "Not while the King's Will is in session. Premye becomes like a citadel during this time, to prevent would-be assassins. I don't think, looking like we do, we'd blend in very well."

Jaylin held up his hand and showed them Alvaron's signet ring. "Then we'll use this and pass off as Jorganon's men."

"It's the fastest way in," Wess agreed, grinning. "I like that. Use the Mark's own signet to sneak you in."

"It's dangerous," Reonna murmured. "What if someone recognizes Jaylin?"

"Then we fight," Jaylin shrugged.

"Who wears the ring?" Ethen asked. "You?" He chuckled. "It would be ironic now, wouldn't it?"

"It's settled then," Jaylin announced. "In fact, it will probably be easier looking the way we do. I'm taking the lead – no offense, Ethen. You're all Jorganon's men, except Reonna. I'll introduce you as Jaylin's woman, whom we've captured and are bringing to the Mark. Look scared. You're our prisoner. The rest of you, hide those rings." He remembered his first day in Minya aboard Jevin's ship. "I don't want you giving us away. Let's do it."

Ethen, Riveyra, and Wess slid their Espion rings off and stuffed them in their pockets. They left the screen of trees and walked straight up to the gate. The sentry officers watched them come and raised their eyebrows in disgust. They looked awful. Looking down at his boots, Jaylin stamped off the filthy brown crust.

"Look angry," Jaylin whispered from the side of his mouth, and put on a deep scowl.

"What's this rabble?" the sentry captain sneered as they approached.

Jaylin held up the Mark's signet ring. "Just completing a dirty assignment," Jaylin snarled. "Where's the Mark?"

One of the sentries bearing Jorganon's livery saw the ring and smiled. "He's with us, let them through."

The King's officers stood aside and let the Espion members in. Jaylin kept his face serious. Once aside from the others, the Mark's sentry said, "Who's this?" pointing to Reonna.

"Warnock's wench from the Bright Well," he whispered with a grin. "She's for Jorganon."

"Did you catch him? The Mark is having fits about this."

"I'm sure he is," Jaylin said angrily. "Those wretched Espion put us through the bitter dregs down there. Last we heard, Lady Minya was hunting him like hounds to a fox. Have him boxed in down in the Tier of Minya. They're expecting he'll surrender or kill himself."

"He's a bloody demon, that one," the sentry muttered. "Jorganon would rather have his head on a plate than a surrender."

Jaylin smiled. "Oh, he has Fate's blessing, that's for sure. But no one can outwit Lady Minya. At least no one in Minya can."

The sentry captain nodded. "Here, we'll escort you to the Mark's estate where you can get cleaned up. I'll send an errand up to Shallic Palace to let him know you're here." He snapped his finger and summoned a group of four sentries from the gate. "I'd like you to escort these folks to the Mark's estate."

"No, please. Don't bother. I have a message from Jorganon, let's see, where is it." Jaylin checked his pockets. "After all we've been through, I've lost it!" He checked again.

"You smell awful," the captain said, wincing.

"It said to report to the Palace with any information. Besides, Lady Minya may have that coddling moth cornered, but I don't trust him. You heard how he got off her trap on Runner's Bridge didn't you?"

The sentry captain shrugged. "No, word hasn't reached us yet."

"He dived off the bridge into the Semn! Can you believe he lived?"

"You'll need an escort," the captain replied. "Especially if you're going to Shallic Palace. Like that."

"If you'd like to come yourself, you're more than welcome," Jaylin offered, hoping that would work. "I'd rather have these men here watching the gates. It's not over yet. Why don't you come with us? You can fetch the Mark and tell him what we have for him." He nodded to Reonna. Jaylin hoped appealing to the captain's ambition was the right stroke.

It was. The man's eyes glittered. "Yes, actually, I think that would be better." He turned to the four who came. "Whellik, you're in charge until I return. Don't start with me, Whellik. Cover your post and watch for Espion. Remember the two thousand dyx. This Atabyrion Espion is worth more than Ritasker of Aster."

The other sentries backed away, grumbling. Jaylin gave the sentry captain a warm smile. They went away from the gates, deeper into Premye. "So, what news from the King's Will so far?"

"Radamistus accused the legion sheriffs of violating the sanctuary of Aster. He demanded the King's Will to grant him jurisdiction over Runner's Bridge, to help prevent anything like that in the future."

"How was it received?"

"They're still debating it. That arse Jevin is speaking against it though, saying that neither the sheriffs nor Aster should control the bridge – a third, neutral party should." He chuckled. "He means himself, of course."

"Has anyone made accusations against the Mark yet?"

The sentry captain smiled and scratched his amber-colored beard. "No, the Queen's captain didn't dare, not all alone. He's surrounded by fifteen of his guardsmen all the time. He's also worth a ransom, but no one's been able to nab him…yet."

"Is that all the news so far?"

"Yes, they've been wrangling about the sanctuary of Aster since it began."

"Thanks, that really helps us," Jaylin said. He pointed toward the church of Aster up on the hill in front of them. "Say, look at the church…"

The sentry captain looked up, shielding his eyes. Ethen dropped him with a quick blow to the head. Jaylin caught him as he fell. Riveyra and Wess grabbed his legs and they hauled him off the road toward the park nearby. Jaylin recognized the land, remembering the night he had left Premye after meeting Jevin. Through that tunnel, they'd find safety in Jevin's estate.

They dumped the body down just before the secret entrance, disguised as a drainage pipe.

"That was easy," Ethen smirked. "So, do we kill him or lock him up in Jevin's dungeon?"

"We don't have time to visit right now, Ethen. It sounds to me like things are ripe for an entrance to the King's Will. Don't you think?"

"Oh my," Reonna gasped. "Right now, like this?"

Ethen looked equally astonished. "But look at us, look at you!"

"Don't you understand? This makes it even better!" Jaylin said, pushing. "It will add to the outrage. Listen, we must decide. Lady Minya knows all the Espion secrets. It's a safe bet that she's waiting for us at Jevin's."

"Are you serious?"

"You don't think she led the search for me in the Tier of Minya, do you?" Jaylin replied. "No, I would wager a year's pay that she thinks we'll try to meet up with Jevin here, and she'll be waiting for us. Jevin himself said that he thought she visited the City room regularly. He has no way of stopping her." He shrugged. "We may stink like hock, but it's best to go straight to Shallic Palace."

"It's a bold move," Reonna replied. "And probably the safest. How would Jevin react to it, Ethen?"

Ethen nodded, "I was wondering the same thing. It's a big risk, Jaylin. A big one. Jevin likes to be in control, likes to plan these kinds of surprises himself. He might be thrilled at our sense of timing, or be very upset that we did this without his consent."

"I don't know the man like you do. But this is urgent news. It will take part of the day just to get to the Palace."

Ethen thought and then nodded. "Let's get you into the Palace first, and then deliver a message to Guyaume Reim. I doubt even Jorganon would dare violate the King's authority at the Palace. He'd lose his head for sure if he did." He nodded again. "Yes, I think that's the right thing. That way, Jevin has control."

"A good idea, Ethen," Jaylin acknowledged. "But we need to hurry. I feel like there are ambushes around every corner. Keep a sharp eye and let's move as quickly as we can."

Ethen nodded. "We've made it this far. The quickest way, the most direct way, is straight up the main road to the palace. Any other path we take would drag on the time."

"Then let's take it," Jaylin said. "You know, Ethen, is Espion business always like this, or am I just lucky?"

"Choke on it," Ethen replied acidly.

"I heard something!" Riveyra warned, pointing to the dark drain grate. Someone moved within and then bootsteps were heard skipping quickly away.

"Soil and fire!" Ethen roared. "They were listening!"

"Forget it," Jaylin snapped. "We can get to the Palace before they do. Go!"

As a group, the survivors of the Minyan sewers went down the street toward the main road. Wess watched from behind, Riveyra from the left. Reonna walked on Jaylin's right, while Ethen forged the way ahead. Reaching the main road, they watched the trickle of traffic going between the main gates and Shallic Palace. There was usually an effusion of bodies and horses, but that had stalled with the advent of the King's Will. Private messengers bearing badges Jaylin had never seen galloped past. Alvaron was not the only Mark in Minya and there were errands everywhere, sending and delivering messages and news. The crests of the other families were bright and colorful. Jaylin could feel the tension tingle in the back of his neck.

"Who do these banners belong to?" Jaylin asked Reonna.

"The Marks of Alvaron, Morvenn, Asilomar, Eliadis, Cathbad, Dudonis…several others. Must be new since I don't recognize them. See how Alvaron's is the highest on the poles? It's a status of

honor, Jaylin."

"By the time we leave the Palace," Jaylin promised, "you'll see it in the gutter."

About a quarter mile before reaching the tall tower gate of Shallic Palace, Jorganon's ambush hit them. Without warning, twelve men wearing the livery of the Mark of Alvaron came through the brush, sabers drawn. "The one in the middle!" a sentry captain with raven hair ordered. There was no time to talk their way through, for swords came whistling against them, six from each side.

Shoving Reonna behind him, Jaylin met the first rush with a fury he'd never felt. He could see the parapet flags of the Sovereign posted on the tower, the iron teeth of the portcullis. They were too close to be stopped now, and the four weary Espion fought against the Mark's men like the dragon on Jevin's standard. Jaylin felt a ribbon of flesh open up as he caught the man's throat with a lucky slice. He deflected the other's thrust and kicked the man's knee, hard enough to snap a tree limb. The man crumpled and went down. Grabbing Reonna's arm, Jaylin pulled her through the gap he'd cleared and they both ran up the stone steps, out of breath.

He glanced back once, saw Ethen, Wess, and Riveyra surrounded. Gritting his teeth with rage, he stormed up the hill, half-dragging the Espion girl after him. He saw the King's Guard at the top of the gate sweep down, some on horseback. Holding his short sword in front, he prepared to stand against them all.

Until he saw Guyaume Reim on the lead stallion.

"House of Alvaron, lay down your arms or forfeit your heads!" the head of the Espion roared. Jaylin sighed a prayer of thanks to Aster. "Captain, kill the next one who raises his sword," Guyaume ordered. "Subdue those men and bring them up to the Palace for breaching the king's peace. Kill any who flee or resist."

Guyaume thundered up to Jaylin, looking down at him as if he were a stranger. But then recognition lit his face. "Jaylin Warnock, have you been sleeping in the sewers, lad?" he asked with a glint in his hazel eyes. "Reonna, he's absolutely filthy! I hold you responsible for that."

"Guyaume," Jaylin panted. He felt hope spark and blaze in his chest. "You have no idea…what we've been through. I'm glad to see you again, my lord."

"Well done, well done, Jaylin," Guyaume beamed. "Jevin had suspicions that you were alive and on the way here. The Mark of Alvaron's men have been accosting every errand on the way here. Some of my men saw them preparing an ambush, but we wanted to wait to see whom they were ambushing." Jaylin sighed with relief. "The tower is controlled by us, as is the main entrance. Hurry, we must get there before the session ends."

"I must speak with Jevin immediately, and Jorganon cannot know we're here. When you find out what I've brought, the Tier of Premye will buckle!"

Guyaume shook his head. "Good, but we must go directly to the King's Will. It ends within the hour. If we don't act now, there's no way we can stop Jorganon knowing about it. Now is the time, if you have the news I hope you do."

Jaylin swallowed. "Now?"

"This moment exactly. I'll be there to coach Jevin's reaction, but believe me, he's ready to denounce the Mark."

Jaylin squeezed Reonna's hand. "You're coming with me," he said to her. "Ethen too. Ethen, get up here!"

"Quickly now," Guyaume insisted. "If Lady Minya is near, we must hurry."

"Is the Captain of the Queen's Guard there?" Jaylin asked.

Guyaume thought. "He's with the Guard right now protecting the Queen."

Jaylin nodded. "Good. He needs to be there also. The Mark of Alvaron will fall, and I'm not

certain what will happen after that."

"Leave that to Jevin and myself," Guyaume replied. "There's only one missing link, though. Only one thing that can make this fail. Do you know where Lady Kalisha is? And do you have proof?"

"I do, and I have. But can she be talked about openly at the King's Will?"

Guyaume nodded. "Of course, it's been a controversy since the King's Will began why she wasn't there. The king is visibly disturbed by her absence and especially that no one seems to know where she is." Guyaume's eyes glittered. "At the moment, I would say he suspects the Mark of abducting her."

"That isn't going to help Jorganon, you know," Jaylin replied wryly. "What I have to say may destroy him. How will the Queen react to that?"

"It depends on how strong your evidence is. She knows her brother is a fool, but if she supports him in treason, she'll be guilty herself. There are many who fear her power, and she knows it. I doubt she'd interfere, just so long as the evidence doesn't implicate her. Does it?"

Jaylin shook his head. "Not at the moment. Let's get in there then, Guyaume."

As they approached the main gate of Shallic Palace, Jaylin saw that the Espion had surrounded and secured it. Dozens of men wearing the black and dragon badges filled the courtyard, interspersed with the king's guardsmen. Jaylin felt confident that there would be no more surprises, and he began forming what he would say if asked to speak. He wanted to be eloquent, or risk seeming a fool. Especially with the way he was dressed.

The King's Will met in the Chapel of Aster, right inside the main doors of the Palace. It was clearly marked with the religious sigils of the god, the triangle and rings. The chapel extended three hundred paces in length, with rows and pews for the guests to gather on. Up on the altar row, a huge council table stood with a flowing purple cloth on it. It was shaped like a flat arch, forking toward the audience. The Sovereign of Minya sat in a throne at the center of it, the relics of Aster directly behind and above him. A table laden with food, mead, and stacks and sheaves of paper and inkwells stood covered the table. At the center of the table a pedestal rose, on which a speaker stood and addressed those seated there, facing the congregation. To the king's right were Jevin and other nobles of Premye, including the Deconeus of Aster. Radamistus had a perpetual scowl and his gray-washed hair was swept back. On the left sat the city officials, including the Provost of Minya, Retkonen. The table was full, all seats taken. There were lawyers everywhere, scribing what was said and by whom. A central aisle ran directly through the audience leading to the altar. The crowd on the king's right were denizens of the Tier of Premye. There sat all the Marks and their sentries, the household officers who assisted them. Those on the other side, including an over-crowded balcony, were those from other Tiers. The audience was huge and noisy, but the shape of the altar and the angles of stone actually reflected and echoed the speaker's words back at the crowd.

Jaylin paused at the door. There were too many faces, but he searched them frantically for Thasos. "I don't see him," he whispered.

"Jevin's right there next to the king," Guyaume replied, pointing. "I want you to wait here. I'll approach Jevin and let him know you're here. He may expect you to walk down that center aisle to get everyone's attention. Be ready."

"Guyaume..." Jaylin sighed nervously. There were probably a thousand people assembled.

"Ah, Jorganon's still here. Look. Front row center, the fool! Everyone will be able to see him. Wait here for Jevin to call for you. You have evidence about Kalisha, now? Are you certain?"

"Written by her own hand," Jaylin replied evenly. "How much time do I have?"

"A few minutes really. The King's Will adjourns soon. We want this to happen now, before

Lady Minya can act." He turned to the Espion flanking Jaylin, Ethen, and Reonna. "His life is in your hands. Watch the crowd for assassins. Be sure, Espion. Be sure. The honor of your Prince is at stake."

Guyaume Reim grinned wolfishly at Jaylin and then crept around the crowd and started down the side aisle along the alcoves toward the table. Jaylin stretched himself on his toes and gazed at the crowd. He watched Guyaume as he went and then saw Thasos pass him, heading the opposite direction. The captain's gaze met his own, and he walked faster.

Jaylin motioned to the escort to follow and he met Thasos at the rear corner of the Chapel. They embraced like Atabyrions, hands clasped in front and arms around each other's shoulders. It was also perfect for whispering.

"Thank Aster you're alive," Thasos seethed in his ear. The hug was bone-breaking tight. "You're in danger."

"The Espion is with me," Jaylin whispered back. "I need your help against Jorganon."

Thasos pulled back, his eyes narrow and hard. His grip on Jaylin's hand tightened even more. A grin creased his beard and he nodded. "Shall I hold the arrogant rake down while you stamp him? I may need a new career afterwards depending how the Queen takes it. Where is Reim going?"

"If you need a new career after this, you talk to me first. We Atabyrion's fly together like geese."

Thasos smiled, a broad rich smile. "Aster smite me, but it's good to see you! I thought either you were squashed and burned alive, or she'd imprisoned you in the bowels of the city." He sniffed and stepped back. "I'll guess she did the latter. You reek, Jaylin."

"It's just the sewers, Thasos," Jaylin replied archly. Thasos' eyebrows raised. "No, it's not what you're thinking. I'll have to tell you all about my jump off Runner's Bridge, the ambush at Bright Well and our escape into the sewers. But we'll save that for a keg of mead and a nice tavern in Median." Jaylin cleared his throat. "As for Guyaume, he's preparing Jevin for the good news about Jorganon. I'll be called up to testify any moment."

"Did you find her?" the captain asked. "Lady Kalisha I mean?"

"I did. Just be ready, Thasos. I'll try to be sensitive to Queen Keyana, but I have a feeling she won't like me after this."

"Oh, believe me. She won't be the only one, I promise you."

Jaylin chuckled. "You might try warning her, if you can. Premye's shame will sing."

"Glad I brought my sword," Thasos returned, nodding. "Let me go warn my guardsmen. I'm with you, Jaylin of Abyri. You're right – we need to fly in a flock." He peered back at the table. "Then it starts," he muttered.

Prince Jevin's voice rose in indignation. "In Aster's name how dare you!"

* * *

All eyes went to Prince Jevin, who stood, his finger directed at the Mark of Alvaron in anger. "Our Sovereign of Minya, I have bold accusation to level against the Mark of Alvaron, who I have learned just attacked my man as he approached the gates of Shallic Palace! You cannot tolerate this breach of the King's Peace!"

Jorganon was on his feet. "What presumption is this?" he sneered, equally bold. "My servants are gathered around me at this moment. What mischief do you speak of, Prince Jevin?"

"My lord," Guyaume piped in. "The Espion accosted men wearing the regalia of the Mark of Alvaron besetting one of Jevin's sworn men, also a member of the Espion. This is a grave accusation, my lord, but the evidence is verified by the one who was attacked. He is here now."

"If it please your Majesty," Jevin cut in. "Let him accuse the Mark of Alvaron."

Jaylin saw the king shift in his throne and play with a goblet. He was a not a big man, though he was around the waist. He had a gnarled black beard with streaks of gray in it. His voice was low, but it carried. "Do we have time for this by-play, Jevin? I'm weary and the session is nearly ended."

"I think it would please our Sovereign of Minya to hear him," Jevin prodded intently. "It was he who I sent to inquire after the Lady Kalisha at your behest. He bears tidings as well as blame."

Jaylin saw the king stiffen in the throne, spilling the drink over his tunic. "Kalisha?" he murmured. The heartsick look on his face was visible even across the hall. He struggled to compose himself. "Yes, bring the man forward."

"Your Majesty!" Jorganon seethed, advancing. "This can wait until the morrow, I assure you. Would you not rather hear his tidings in private? My sister, after all, is present and..."

"Is a suspect in her disappearance," Davin-Noll Tousann snapped. "Bring your man, Jevin. I would hear him."

It was time, Jaylin thought excitedly. He wished Trillings were there to watch.

"Your highness, this isn't necessary..." Jorganon's voice wavered.

"Be silent, Jorganon. Come forward!"

"But, Davin – wait..."

"If you dare use my name before this hall again," the king said, "I will strike you myself for presumption! Sit down, House of Alvaron."

The Mark stood furiously, his hand clenching.

"Sit down!"

Jaylin approached down the center aisle, feeling the anger and barbs in their tone. Jaylin walked with confidence, feeling all eyes turn to him. Some winced with disgust, others gaped in shock at his appearance. He probably would have agreed with them. Walking forward, he kept his eyes on Jorganon until the Mark turned and saw him.

"No..." he whispered, surprise contorting his face.

Jaylin gave him a half-smile.

"Sit down!!" the king roared, leaning forward. His hazel eyes blazed with fury, the laconic posture replaced by a regal zeal. It was the Tousann temper at full blaze, and Jaylin knew he'd call a headsman if the Mark didn't obey.

The Mark fell into the chair, stricken with shock. Jaylin looked at the Sovereign as he approached. He was not a tall man, and he had a good-sized belly, but not an overly obtuse one. He had a crinkled black beard with streaks of gray, and his hair on top was wavy and thin, showing glimpses of his scalp. It was cropped short, in the Minyan fashion. After glaring at the Mark, he peered intelligently at Jaylin. His hazel eyes were the same as Jevin's. Next to the king, he saw the Prince, his eyes intent, his face revealing nothing but the righteous indignation he was feigning. His eyes gleamed with pride, and he stared at Jaylin with approval. Next to the Sovereign of Minya sat the Queen of Minya. She was a beautiful woman. Her blonde hair was speckled with streaks of silver, her blue-green eyes deep and cunning. She stared contemptuously at Jaylin. Right behind her, Thasos gave him a wink.

When Jaylin reached the podium, he stared across at the leaders of the City of Minya. He never thought he would get the chance to stand before them all. There was Radamistus, silver-haired and mischievous, his dark eyes probing. The Provost seemed to be enjoying this scene immensely. Awash in this sea of politics, Jaylin saw the brain and the will of the City of Minya. The factions that fought yet made it all work. And they were all staring at him.

Jaylin nearly fainted.

Dropping to one knee, he bowed and quickly withdrew Kalisha's letter from his boot. It was damp in his hand, but the special Espion boots had protected it from destruction. That intrigued the king, who stared at him hungrily.

"Rise, lad. What is your name?" Davin-Noll asked, loud enough for all to hear.

"My name is Jaylin Warnock of Abyri."

"An Atabyrion?"

Jaylin nodded. "I serve the King's Will."

"It would please us," the Sovereign continued, leaning back and folding his arms imperiously, "To hear your accusation against the Mark of Alvaron. I would like the truth, Warnock. All of it."

"Our Sovereign of Minya," Jaylin replied, bowing again, and then slowly rose. He lifted his voice so it would echo. "I must apologize for my appearance. I haven't slept in nearly three days, and I have scarcely avoided death to bring you these tidings and evidence against the Mark of Alvaron."

"Do so, Warnock," the king answered, nodding. "At the peril of your life if they be not true nor proven."

"I would never insult your majesty by bringing accusation without sufficient proof," Jaylin replied. He sighed slowly. "I accuse Jorganon, Mark of Alvaron, of murder against one representing the King's Will." There was a gasp in the audience hall. "Also, of attempted murder and conspiracy against the Throne. Consorting with his majesty's enemies, the abuse of a member of the King's household, even to and including the violation of the King's own bedchamber."

All civility and order in the chapel of Shallic Palace shattered like a thousand wine glasses.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN
Shallic Palace, Tier of Premye

The roar in the chapel drowned Jaylin in a rush of sounds. Shouts and accusations whirled while insults, threats, and prayers lifted and echoed throughout the stone alcoves and the domed arches above. He gripped the podium as his knees weakened. What was he doing! Opening his eyes, he saw Jevin beaming with satisfaction. He didn't dare look back at Jorganon for fear of smiling too smugly at the man. One voice chopped through the maelstrom.

"Silence!!" the king commanded.

"...stand still for this outrage, I accuse this man of slander and challenge him to a contest of swords! Do you hear me, Davin-Noll! I challenge him to prove his words, and may Aster judge between us! I demand satisfaction, or I swear by..."

"Silence!!!"

"A contest of swords! I will not tolerate the insolence of these accusations! This is presumption in the highest degree! From a foreigner, and a slovenly mess such as this! How do you even allow him…"

"If the Mark of Alvaron will not desist!" Davin-Noll thundered. "Gag him! This is the King's Will. I command you all to be silent, or I will turn loose my Guards! Captain Kemper, restore order!"

A hush fell over the crowd instantly as the ring of guardsmen before the crowds slid sabers from their sheathes. The king looked at Jaylin in astonishment.

"Young man, these are bold accusations. I am certain you realize that your life is forfeit if you cannot prove them all." He shook his head. "By Aster's sweet name, give me patience to hear this. What evidence have you that the Mark of Alvaron is guilty of such crimes?"

"Your Majesty," Jorganon implored.

The king held up his finger, his eyes still on Jaylin.

"Is that your evidence?" The Sovereign pointed to the paper.

"It is, Majesty, but only a part of it," Jaylin answered, bowing his head. "You have heard of the ambush outside the Palace, the last in a series of attempts on my life by the Mark of Alvaron. The first was at the home of Kalisha."

"Dear Aster," the king gasped, shooting a venomous look at Jorganon.

"Your Majesty," Jevin intruded. "You assigned me to find her. In your name, I commissioned this man. It was your task. Let him tell you how the Mark scorned the authority of the King's Will."

Jaylin nodded. "Yes, despite that knowledge, the Mark of Alvaron personally beat me. Unfairly, I will add, while his men held me down. He then ordered me branded like a criminal and thrown into the sewers of Minya."

"He lies!" Jorganon seethed.

Jaylin stared hard at the ruler of Minya. "Were it not for the intervention of another, I would be dead in the sewers. However, my savior did not arrive in time to prevent this." Jaylin revealed the brand on his arm. "My words are true, Sovereign. There is another present who saw this brand burned into my shoulder. I did not earn it any other way."

"Who is this other?" the king asked.

Jaylin nodded to Thasos. "His name is Captain Thasos Walkelin. The Queen had dispatched him to investigate the Mark's actions."

Queen Keyana sat still, her eyes darting from Jorganon to Jaylin. A dark scowl furrowed her beautiful face, but she didn't speak.

"Captain Thasos? You can verify his words?"

"I can and I do, your Majesty," Thasos said with a grim voice as he stepped forward. "I witnessed the brutality inflicted on this man, including the branding of his arm. When I commanded Alvaron's sentries to stop, the Mark's officers defied me. And he yet dares charge this man with presumption. The Queen, after all, serves the King's Will too."

Jaylin recognized that Thasos was trying to protect the Queen.

"He threw them into the sewers!" Jorganon sneered. "Without trial, he threw my officers into the sewers! I demand justice of him as well."

Thasos raised his eyebrow. "I will gladly draw my sword and let Aster judge between us." He chuckled. "You were quick to challenge a wounded man, Jorganon. Will you challenge me?"

Jorganon flushed, his cheeks turning purple with rage.

"After this incident," Jaylin continued, "The Mark of Alvaron put a two thousand dyx reward for both myself and Captain Thasos. His men have been guarding every gate to Premye searching for me. He even paid an enemy of Premye to capture me and turn me over to him."

"Who?"

Jaylin glanced at Jevin and saw the Prince's eyes twinkle with delight. He gave a quick, almost imperceptible nod.

"A woman known as Lady Minya," Jaylin said. "A woman I'm certain nearly everyone at this table is familiar with. A traitor to the City of Minya."

Gasps irrupted in pockets from the audience. The Queen paled, her eyes wide with shock. Radamistus gazed evenly, unruffled, as if enjoying the exchange. Provost Retkonen swallowed and glanced at Jevin. The Sovereign gazed fixedly at Jorganon, his hazel eyes smoldering.

"I could go on with Jorganon's actions against myself, Captain Thasos, and the King's Will, but I will get to the evidence that I think will be most convincing to you. I was assigned to determine the whereabouts of Lady Kalisha. This is a letter for you, Majesty. Written by her own hand."

"By the Veil," Jorganon murmured in desperation. "Where is she?"

"Where you will never find her!" Jaylin snapped. "Your majesty?" He offered the letter. "It will answer all your questions. She asked that you be the first to read this before it was shared with anyone else. With your permission?"

The king nodded dumbly, and Jaylin stepped down from the podium and advanced toward the table. He gave the folded paper to the king's trembling hand. Davin-Noll's hair was salted through with gray, and he had large circles of fatigue under his eyes. He shifted uncomfortably, as if in constant pain. He wore the scab of death, Jaylin saw. It was spreading. Jaylin bowed and retreated. Glancing back at the Mark, he noticed that someone had handed him a note.

Jaylin returned to the podium and waited as the king, in front of the entire court of Minya, read the letter. Davin-Noll's shoulders sagged and he put his hands over his eyes to stanch the tears. The hand that held the letter dropped, and he struggled to control his emotions. When he looked up, through blood-strained teary eyes, the stricken look on his face and the fury in his jaw made Jaylin swallow. The look he gave the Mark showed that Jorganon was a dead man.

"You invaded my bedchamber?" he whispered, his voice thick with emotion. "You tried to seduce her from me?"

"She was never yours, Davin-Noll. She was mine! Why would she want an old man in his dotage? She feared you, but she loved me."

"That is not true," Jaylin cut in, shaking his head. "She told me herself, your Majesty. She left

because she feared the Mark of Alvaron. She feared what he would do to her."

"You drove her away," the king said, rising to his feet. He shook his head, as if coming clear of a fog. "You drove her away from me, you willful snubdog! Too many times I have ignored your tantrums, Jorganon, for my wife's sake. I've overlooked your treachery and made excuses for your arrogance. But this is presumption in the highest degree, and I cannot…I *will* not allow it! In the holy name of Aster, I arrest you and charge you with treason against your Sovereign!" His voice dropped to a low growl, full of ice. "You will feel the traitor's brand and the bite of blood rats on your flesh. I order you to stand trial for your crimes. There will be no duel, only evidence. Only truth. And if a court of the Marks of Minya finds you guilty, which I do not doubt, I will brand you myself before shoving your murderous body into the deepest sewers of Minya. Jevin, arrest him!"

Jaylin turned to see the Mark's expression. His eyes were blank with disbelief. He crumpled a note in his fist. As the Sovereign of Minya towered on the dais, his pronouncement of judgment still echoing in the hall, Jorganon shoved aside his men and bolted for the nearest cloisters. A sharp cry rang out and soldiers and sentries closed in from all sides. But the Mark was fit and desperate, and he rushed past them, shoving aside a servant who blocked the way. Jaylin thought he saw, in the shadows of the alcove, a set of cold gray eyes and watching them – Etayne's eyes.

Jaylin turned to Jevin. "My Prince! She's here!"

"Where!" Jevin said, his eyes gleaming. "I want her, I want her now!"

"Have your men cover all the exits," Jaylin said. "She'll try to sneak him out. Thasos!"

The Captain of the Queen's guard had already dodged around the table and joined Jaylin. Jorganon disappeared into the cloisters, but Jaylin and Thasos came close behind. Ethen joined them, his eyes grim, and he had three Espion with him.

"Out of the way!" Thasos ordered, clearing the path to join Jaylin before the council.

"Find her, Jaylin!" Jevin ordered. "I'll secure the Palace and the gates. Find her!" Turning to the guards with the black and green livery, he ordered, "Pursue the Mark of Alvaron – I want him alive! Send horsemen to every gate in the Tier. No one leaves – not a soul!"

"This is getting interesting," Jaylin said to Thasos and they ran and maneuvered toward the hall. "Where would they go?"

"These cloisters all have secret passageways, but I know most of them. Follow me!" He whistled to the Queen's Guard who joined them. "Willse, I want Archers to follow us. You're looking for a woman, elegant, blonde. Dead or alive?" He looked to Jaylin.

"Honestly, I doubt Jevin cares," Jaylin replied.

Thasos nodded. "You have your orders. Coordinate with the Prince, but send Tem and a dozen sentries after us. Now move!" He turned to Jaylin. "They can't be far."

Passing into the dark corridors, Thasos triggered a secret release and the cloister doors whooshed open. The passageway was dark, but they could hear boots clipping down the rug and voices dropping echoes behind. Jaylin recognized hers.

"You put yourself in this, Jorganon," Etayne seethed, "and you'll get yourself out. There's a horse at west palace gate if you can make it..."

Her words were cut off when four men jumped from the shadows and attacked Jaylin and Thasos.

"We don't have time for this!" Jaylin yelled, jerking his short sword free. He blocked the first blow. The captain of the guard surged forward, cutting a wide swath with his highlander. Jaylin followed in his wake. Dodging the falling bodies, he hurried after them.

"Dispatch these men!" Ethen ordered to the other Espion, following the two Atabyrions. Breaking free, they stormed down the secret tunnel and a huge sideshaft where they'd heard the

voices carry from.

"I want her, Thasos," Jaylin said. "We can't let her get away."

"I know this Palace as well as anyone," he replied, leading the way. "I've always fancied the idea of crossing blades with her."

"This may be your chance, Walkelin," Ethen said. "Be careful. She's wicked fast. One of the Espion's best."

"I know – but I've beaten the Espion's best!"

Jaylin grinned, felt the thrill of the chase. Deeper in the throat of Shallic Palace, they found a side alcove. Framed in the archway, sunlight shimmering on her hair, Jaylin saw Etayne press palms with the Mark of Alvaron.

"What about you?" he asked roughly. A horse snorted just beyond.

"It's me Jevin wants," she said. "More even than you. Now go, before the circle closes! Perhaps we shall meet in Merohwey." Jorganon disappeared and the horse grunted as it was mounted. Etayne faced them, a cold look in her eyes. She wasn't wearing a gown this time. She wore a tight-fitting gray tunic and pants, with knee-high, soft boots. Her hair was back, held behind her by an intertwining braid. Like a cat, she darted through a doorway deeper into the citadel.

"What about the Mark?" Thasos asked as they approached the west palace door.

Jaylin saw him through the arch, riding crazed through the grounds toward the woods ringing the castle. "Jevin will catch him. Where does that door lead?"

"To the towers," Thasos replied, throwing it open. He braced himself in case she attacked. But there lay a wide spiraling stairwell leading straight up.

"She's made herself the quarry," Ethen said. "To lead us away from the Mark. Be careful! You have no idea how dangerous she is!"

"So am I," Thasos snapped and charged up the stairs, taking them three at a time. Jaylin followed and Ethen held back.

"Jorganon's on horseback! Watch west temple gate, sound the trumpets! Bring those Archers here, we're heading up Curvain tower." After making the orders, Ethen followed.

Thasos glanced down at Jaylin. "She'd better be faster than us, or we've got her. These towers are like mazes. Once she goes up, she'll not be coming down this way. We've got her."

"Keep alert," Jaylin said. "I don't trust her." He raised his short sword and kept up with Thasos. The stairwell was dark, and they could not hear her footfalls. Jaylin watched the darkness, anything that would give him a hint where she was lurking. Higher on the stairs, a golden shaft of sunlight spilled in as a window along the high wall opened. Jaylin saw her, perched on the sill, opening it. Then she was gone, through the window to whatever lay beyond.

"She's quiet," Thasos said through clenched teeth. They reached the window and the captain jumped up on the sill in a single bound. "There she is...on the catwalk. Come on!"

Thasos sheathed his sword and jumped outside, grabbing onto the catwalk lip and swinging himself upon it. Jaylin followed, catching a glimpse of Etayne down the narrow stone ramp up toward another high narrow tower. Jaylin swung himself up also, steadying himself. The wind rushed and shoved at them. For a moment, he felt the height and his stomach coiled. Shaking his head, he studied the far tower. Pennant spokes with the flags of Minya whipping beneath them studded the tower wall. There was also a window above each pennant spoke.

Jaylin watched Etayne reach the door at the far side of the catwalk. It was locked. Thasos drew his sword and stormed up the ramp.

"By order of the King's Will, stop!" Thasos commanded, charging her.

Her hands worked at the lock and then it opened and she went inside, slamming it behind her.

Ethen spat out a curse. "She'll lock it!"

Thasos sprinted and reached the door just as a heavy crossbar fell into place.

"No!" Jaylin yelled, feeling the wind toss his hair every direction. "Thasos, can you burst through it?"

The Queen's captain was already trying. His heavy boot thudded against the door, blow after blow. It buckled but held. Cursing furiously, Thasos kept at it, kicking and slamming into the door.

"Look! Jorganon!" Ethen called, pointing down.

They could see his charging horse breaking clear of the woods surrounding the steep plateau. Foot sentries trailed after him, but a line of brown geldings emerged from the king's stables, bearing down on him quickly.

"He's going down the slope?" Ethen shrieked. "He's mad!"

Jaylin already knew that. The Mark rode down the steep slope of the plateau, sitting far back in the saddle. He nearly fell, but he managed to keep his seat, almost on the horse's rump. Jaylin swore, but he could see nearly all of Premye, and he heard the shrill trumpets sound from the palace towers along the wall. Guardsmen and sentries swarmed over the entrance.

The door buckled and a huge crack went down the middle. "Curse it, open!" Thasos yelled.

Jaylin felt torn, watching the Mark's stallion glide down the steep slopes. That would definitely shake loose the majority of his pursuers, but wouldn't they be able to guard the gates?

The door splintered and crashed open. Thasos staggered, holding his leg. "It's about bloody time! Get in there!"

Ethen and Jaylin sprang into the room, weapons drawn. It was a flat landing with two benches alongside a torch rack. The stairwell wound down and up and disappeared both directions. The tower was wider and better lit than the one they had come from. Ethen started for the stairwell leading down. "She's probably racing to join Alvaron. Come on."

Thasos limped in, shaking out his leg, and followed, but something stopped Jaylin. Of course, Etayne would expect them to think she had gone down. But had she? She was just the kind of person who might take the stairwell up, cross back to the previous tower to elude them. "I think she went this way," Jaylin whispered, pointing up.

"We're losing time. Make up your minds," Thasos grunted. He clenched the highlander in both hands.

It was risky, a chance. "Let's try this," Jaylin said, breathing softly. "Thasos, go back across, quickly, and go up to the next catwalk. Up, not down. Ethen, you'll come with me up these stairs. If we're lucky, we'll catch her between us."

Thasos grinned. "Well enough. Let's go."

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" Ethen said, his face full of anger. "She could be nearly to the ground..."

"Then go! There isn't enough time to argue it. How often have you been right about her?"

"Cocky Atabyrion," the Espion muttered.

Jaylin and Ethen stalked silently up the stairwell, short swords ready. Thasos disappeared out amidst the splinters and onto the howling catwalk. They climbed three more levels and reached the top of the tower. Above, a huge bell hung in the wood and iron webbing with lifts and ropes. There were slats in the roof, where the sound could echo for miles. Across the room and a thatch of woodwork acting as the floor, Jaylin saw Etayne working the lock on the door on the far wall. They were behind her, but her she must have heard the scuff of their boots because she whirled to face them, a curved dagger glinting in her hand. The light came in at angles, and Jaylin could see her, half-shadowed. Her eyes were greenish-gray, full of anger and satisfaction.

"Jevin did well choosing you, Jaylin," she whispered. "But you should have joined me when I first offered."

"Join you, Etayne? Why should I limit myself like that? I'll earn more than you ever have."

She laughed, but her eyes were dagger points. "More? I hadn't realized you were so ambitious."

"You are nothing Etayne," Jaylin said with a sneer, circling to the right. Ethen slowly circled to her left, his expression seething with hate. There was familiarity in his eyes, recognition of a past betrayal that festered with worms. It was Ethen's opportunity for glory, one that Jaylin knew he had been waiting for years to happen. And he also recognized that Ethen was much better prepared for the fight than he was.

"It's over, Etayne," Jaylin said, stepping around in a wide arc, watching her through the dust motes swirling in the air of the bell tower. "The Mark is finished. Halesowen is next, if he's not already dead. I am going to destroy your operation...or whatever is left of it. Piece by piece, if I have to. This is not your City any more."

She moved away from the door, allowing them to advance on each side of her, a dagger poised in her right hand. She looked like a gray sparrow hawk on the hunt. Her hair was silky, swept down her back. There was a fragile look about her, yet it was the deadliest of illusions.

"To do that, little Jaylin, you would need to kill me."

Jaylin thought he heard a brief, muffled sound from outside. Thasos, he prayed, let it be Thasos.

"Kill you or imprison you, I don't really care. But realize that there's nothing you can do about it. Do you want to know why?" He waited for her answer.

"Because Captain Thasos is on the catwalk outside?"

He smiled sadly and shook his head. "Because I don't think enough of you to let emotions lead me to foolish mistakes. You're just a job, Etayne. A few weeks of pay. You used to be a power in this City, but no longer. It's over, Etayne. I've won."

"You haven't earned me yet!" Etayne raised the dagger to throw it. Ethen rushed her from behind, sweeping his short sword around in a blur of steel, but she spun on her heel and threw it, dead-mark accurate, into his throat. Blood gushed from where the haft protruded and Ethen sank to his knees, choking. The determination in his eyes was replaced with wild panic and pain. He tried to scream, but the sound that came out made Jaylin sick to his stomach.

Jaylin swore, stepped forward and hurled his sword at her.

Nimbly, Etayne dropped to the floor and the weapon flew over her, clattering against the far wall. Her reflexes danced like the tips of a flame. Rising again, she faced him, her hands held out in a defensive posture, her fingers like daggers themselves.

"Just a job, am I?"

She vaulted forward, her boot whirling around toward his face. Jaylin twisted and ducked, managing to avoid the brunt of the blow, but her foot glanced his temple and it knocked him down. He dive-rolled away and made it back on his feet, his eyes stinging.

Etayne had another dagger, in her left hand this time. "You're not even Espion," she said. "Your only weapon is your mouth. Why don't you try talking me to death, Jaylin. Convince me with your charm to surrender myself. You talk of having no emotion for this, but I can tell by the fire in your eyes that you didn't want Spanyer dead." She chuckled. "He was the more dangerous one of you. But I knew that. After all, I trained him."

Jaylin kept back, out of the range of that dagger. Where was Thasos?

She produced a wounded look. "Aren't you going to fight me, Jaylin? Jevin's new man...look

at you. You're nothing but an Atabyrion whelp. If I gave you a dagger, you wouldn't know which end to grasp."

"Like I said," Jaylin replied evenly, "I don't care enough about you to make foolish mistakes. And I would be a fool to fight you now. Go ahead and leave. Like a mistress who's collected her pay." He reached into his purse and withdrew a silver dyx. He flicked it to her. "Payment for services rendered. It's all you're worth."

There was a crash against the door and it buckled.

Thasos! He smiled. "Go ahead, leave. But I'll find you later, Etayne, hiding like the rest of the sewer men of Minya. Just remember one thing. You used to be the best Espion in the City." He smiled. "Now you'll whimper and snarl like a cur. So, either kill me or run!"

The door thudded again, creaking at the hinges.

She rushed him. Jaylin swallowed and came at her with his fists. He'd squared off with enough sheriffs and felons to know how to fight. She ducked and wove around his blows, quicker than he, and seized his wrist. A memory of what Ethen had done to him in an alley blazed in his mind just as she flipped him on his back. He landed with a jolt. Without letting go, she twisted his arm, dragging him up and then shoved him into the wall. Pain danced in his skull, and he lost vision for a second. Trying kicking back at her, he didn't feel anything connect. Twisting his hand, she dropped him to his knees, shoots of fire going up his arm. He could hardly breathe with the pain.

"You foolish little boy," she whispered, crouching near him. He wanted to speak, but couldn't. Every muscle in his chest and arms burst with agony. He felt tears sting his lashes. "You don't know what you've done." She sighed. "But how could you? You came along, blindly, and upset the careful balance here. That critical balance. Don't you know what Jevin will do if Jorganon falls?" He heard her sigh. "But you don't know him like I do. You did it ignorantly. You denounced me in front of the King's Will, Jaylin. For that alone, I will kill you. But not now, not here. I want you to live to see the result of what you've done." Her grip tightened, making him cry out. She held the dagger to his cheek. "Tell Jevin that the truce is broken. You broke it, Jaylin. You broke it. Tell him that I know what he is up to, and that I will defy him at every step. Tell yourself, Jaylin – remind yourself that it's your fault. Remember what happened to Jorganon. When I bring Jevin down, you will go with him. Just like the Mark. I will ruin you."

"You can try, Etayne," Jaylin seethed, wincing. "You can bloody well try."

She leaned forward and kissed him on the ear. "Remember me," she whispered and then cut his neck.

Jaylin felt blood rush down his throat as her knife carved up from the corner of his jaw along his cheek just above his ear. It felt like his face was on fire. The door burst open, blinding him with light. He was free again but felt weak, and his stomach lurched. The cold wind howled through the belltower, making the huge bell hum. Jaylin covered his ear to stanch the bleeding. The blood seeped through his fingers.

"Good Aster, are you dying?" Thasos rushed to his side and yanked his cape off, pressing it against the wound.

Jaylin gasped with pain. "No. No – she didn't want to kill me. Where…where is she?"

But he knew, deep within the hate coiling in his stomach, that she was already gone.

* * *

Jaylin awoke feeling more rested than he had in a long, long while. He felt Reonna's fingers loop through his hair and he smelled her, sweet and dusky. He opened his eyes, saw her smiling

down at him. He was stretched out on a wide feather mattress, wearing only thin linens.

"Good morning," she whispered, sliding her finger down his nose. "You slept a long while."

"Is it morning already?" Jaylin yawned, unable to remember how he'd managed to remove the boots off his swollen feet. He noticed the green dragon on the black banner on the wall. Jevin's insignia. "Are we at Jevin's estate?"

She shook her head. "We're still in the Palace. I was left here to guard you while you slept. At my own request, of course." She glided her finger along the curve of his chest. "There are quite a few people asking to see you." Her eyes were inviting. "But of course, that may be too scandalous now. You are, after all, the new Mark of Alvaron."

"What!?" Jaylin gasped.

She giggled and pinched his nose. "Just teasing."

He nodded wordlessly and then started tickling her. They rolled in the sheets for a moment, and then Jaylin collapsed, his head throbbing.

"I'm sorry," she sighed, "I'd forgotten. Your head must still ache. Do you want to see it?"

He nodded, and she fetched a glass mirror in a silver gilt frame. The stitches from the scar Jorganon had given him had already faded and healed. But on the other side of his face, along his ear, a nasty red mark with tight stitches climbed in an ugly line to the corner of his eyebrow. It had been a deep cut. Not mortal, but enough to leave a scar. A remembrance. It looked like tear tracks left in blood.

"Jevin wanted to see you when you awoke. Do you want me to call him?" She looked at him invitingly. "Or would you prefer to bathe first?"

"A bath sounds like a good idea," Jaylin smiled and gave her a wink. "But let me talk to Jevin first. There are things that he needs to know."

She nodded. "Let me fetch you some new clothes. I don't think you'd like to speak to Jevin dressed like that."

Jaylin nodded and caught her hand before she slipped off the bed. "And Reonna. Thank you. You're the only really pleasant thing that's happened to me since I came to Minya."

She offered a dimpled smile, leaned over and kissed his other cheek. "You'll always be welcome at the Bright Well, Jaylin. You know that." She looked around the room. "Premye is frightfully boring I think you'll discover. Well, with you here, maybe it won't be so dull."

Jaylin dressed in a fresh linen shirt and some comfortable brown pants. He had new boots provided, Espion-made, and felt more comfortable when Jevin arrived shortly after. The Prince entered the room quietly, his hazel-brown eyes flashing with gratitude and respect. He wore a decorative tunic, green gems sewn into black velvet. White slashes slit his sleeves.

"Did I pass the Measure?" Jaylin asked.

Jevin laughed as he shut the door. "Pass?" He rubbed his hands together, shaking his head with disbelief. He settled into a chair, still chuckling. "Jaylin you have more than passed. I sent you to find Lady Kalisha. In addition to that, you condemned the Mark of Alvaron, a long enemy of mine, and nearly trapped Lady Minya in the tower. You are a true Espion, lad. The makings of one of the best. The question I'm considering is how to compensate you for the good service you've done me."

"You can start by getting me a cup of the best mead in the Palace," Jaylin said wryly. "Don't be stingy with the myristica."

"I think you've earned a drink," Jevin answered. "But what I wonder is how you did it? You've been in Minya scarcely two weeks! It still amazes me." He shook his head. "Two weeks ago I was telling you how much I expected from you. I knew it would be difficult, but you've succeeded beyond those expectations. Tell me your story, Jaylin Warnock. I have been anxious to hear your

report."

Jaylin held up his hand. "Before I do, I'd like to know what I've missed. I'm assuming the Mark is captured?"

Jevin's smile faded. "In a way, yes."

"He's dead?"

"No. He made it off the plateau, but we had him surrounded almost immediately. He ran to the only place he could...to the nearest Church of Aster. He sought sanctuary and received it. My men surround it, and we are checking regularly to make sure he's still in there."

"How long can he stay in there?"

"By law, the protection lasts forty days. After that, I can legally arrest him and drag him back before the King's Will. If you ask me, sanctuary should not protect traitors. But that point is being argued very heatedly at the King's Will at this moment by Radamistus. He doesn't approve of the Mark's actions, but he cannot let us violate that church without consequences for the Tier of Aster."

Jaylin nodded. "So everyone is arguing over Jorganon's right to stay there?"

"Yes, the king is upholding Radamistus' desires, but he's sorely tempted to drag Jorganon out and execute him tonight."

"About Lady Minya," Jaylin said. "The truce is over. I'm assuming you know that. And you wanted the truce to end, Jevin. You wouldn't have let me name her otherwise. Out of curiosity, why?"

Jevin's expression changed, turned thoughtful, serious. "It was a calculated risk, Jaylin. Have you ever played Katkechor, the game of war?"

Jaylin shrugged. "A few times."

"Often in Katkechor, opponents build their defenses against each other to tightly that it requires one of them to risk all by instigating the collapse. I took that risk yesterday, and I've watched the pieces start to fall. I've lost Roth Spanyer, a major player, and I'm surprised I didn't lose you, too." He motioned to the bandage covering his scar.

"She wanted me to live. She said she's going to make you fall, and she wanted me to watch it happen."

Jevin nodded and then shrugged. "Oh, I'm sure she will try." He gave a mischievous smile. "But she doesn't have Jaylin Warnock working for her, does she?" It was asked innocently, but an insinuation was curled around the words too. Did Lady Minya let him go because Jaylin had an alliance with her?

"Let me put any of your doubts to rest, Jevin. This was her first payment," Jaylin ran his finger along his cheek. "I believe we parted as enemies."

"Good. I'm impressed with the friends you've made, though. Captain Thasos is a good ally. I've been trying to win him to the Espion for years."

Jaylin shrugged. "Depending on how the Queen's reacted to her brother's shame, you might get the chance."

"Ahh," Jevin replied, sighing. "She is not pleased, not at all. I heard her in the King's chamber last night, shrieking at him for shaming her in front of the entire assembly. It was a frightening mess."

"Is she serious?" Jaylin asked.

Jevin stoppered a grin. "I rather doubt it. I think she was using her temper to coerce Davin-Noll into forgiving Jorganon. I'm not sure it will work, but in forty days summer will nearly be over. If tempers cool sufficiently, she may try to get him to pardon the Mark."

Jaylin sat up straight, feeling a surge of anger.

Jevin shook his head. "I won't allow that. Not after all he's done. Rather than the sewers, he may end up locked in the Steene for the rest of his life. I suppose I could live with that."

"Can I speak with her?" Jaylin asked.

"Queen Keyana? I don't think you'd want to do that quite yet. She's still very angry with you, I'm sure. Why, what do you want to see her for?"

"No particular reason," Jaylin replied, shrugging. "I guess I like knowing my friends and my enemies."

"That's an odd tendency."

"Perhaps. But it gives me a better sense for them. To be honest, I don't know what she thinks of me, and I would like to hear it from her own lips."

Jevin smiled calmly. "I know Queen Keyana as well as anyone in Premye, Jaylin. My knowledge of her is that she's a very vengeful woman. Quick to hate, quick to be jealous. Her temper is often kept beneath her outer coolness, but I warn you. Her anger festers, and when the opportunity arises, she strikes, like a serpent with venom. She hates me, I'll be the first to confess it." Jevin shrugged. "But frankly, I don't really care. When Davin-Noll dies, I'll make sure that a council rules as Regent until her son comes of age." His eyes narrowed, glinted in the lamplight. "I would never let her rule alone."

"I suppose Thasos will tell me her true feelings then," Jaylin said, shrugging.

Jevin nodded. "You may save yourself a confrontation with her that way. Right now, she'll probably more blame me for your words more than she'd blame you. It might be wiser to keep it that way. Still, she is here, and you can speak to her if you wish."

"I'll consider it. But I would like to speak to Radamistus."

Jevin rolled it his eyes. "You are determined to get to know every leader in Minya, aren't you?"

"And why not?" Jaylin replied, smiling. "I stood in front of the King's Will yesterday and announced to the world who I am. That's hardly appropriate for a spy. But sometimes a little renown can work advantages. Besides, I have some information that Radamistus may or may not be interested in hearing. It might have bearing on his acceptance of the Mark's sanctuary."

"Really?" Jevin leaned forward. "And what would that be?"

"Jorganon has a man in Aster. A Keeper, I believe. I'm pretty sure he knows who the man is, he just doesn't know who he may be working for. I don't know," he shrugged. "It may not be much at all."

"This is very intriguing," Jevin said intensely. "I'm sure Radamistus wants to know. I would like to as well."

Jaylin leaned back, stretching out his legs. "Well...now we get to the good stories."

"Your report," Jevin replied, nodding. "My understanding is that you left my estate and went directly with my errand to Kalisha's residence. There you were accosted by a legion sheriff but allowed to enter. Next, I heard that Jorganon was told you were there, and that he took his sentries with him and arrested you."

"Correct so far."

Jevin smirked. "Judging by the scar on your cheek, you had words with Jorganon. He probably wanted to know what I'd done with Kalisha." Jaylin nodded. "Rather than telling him what he wanted to hear, you provoked him and he beat you. You were then to be dumped into the sewers...when Captain Thasos came to the rescue. This much I know very well, from the Espion reports in Median. Then Spanyer reported that you were seen on Runner's Bridge, eating breakfast with the Captain. You were followed and seen entering the Steene. Why?"

"I have a contact there," Jaylin replied. "One that I'd made from Captain Trillings in Abyri. The contact told me the identity of Halesowen. In fact, I recognized Halesowen at the Steene, but he did not see me. My contact agreed to deliver a message to Halesowen for me, so I could contact him and thereby contact Lady Minya."

"Carshalton?" Jevin asked. "Your contact was Carshalton. I have Espion in the Steene too, Jaylin. And you were seen speaking to him."

Jaylin nodded. "I'm impressed with the reach of your influence, Jevin. But yes, my contact was

Carshalton." He paused before continuing. "So I met with Halesowen and he delivered my message to Lady Minya. She sent a little urchin with a note for me, telling me to meet her on Jay-Sharp in Lunis."

"Aahhh," Jevin replied. "The fire at Suttons. Yes, that would have to be you then. But why in Aster's name would you seek to meet Lady Minya? She took you down into the tunnels of Lunis, didn't she?"

Jaylin smiled. "Yes, and crashed the building down. To be honest, Jevin, I didn't think she would harm me. She'd shown interest in me on board your ship, and I remembered that. By not wearing your ring, I hoped to fool her into questioning my loyalties. She said she knew where Kalisha was, but wouldn't tell me. Unless, of course, I was willing to give her anything she asked for anytime she wanted it."

Jevin scowled.

"Don't worry, I didn't agree! She told me about the price on my head – on Thasos' too. She was going to turn me over to the Mark, but I escaped with two of her henchmen following me. I eluded them, and ended up at a dead-end. That's where I met the Mark's assassin."

"Really?" Jevin asked, intrigued. "You spoke to him?"

"Yes, his name is Dragan."

Recognition flashed in Jevin's eyes. "Interesting. I've heard that name. What was he doing in the tunnels?"

"He'd hired someone in the Tier of Aster. I recognized his signet ring, knew he worked for the Mark. I escaped him and went into the Tier of Aster for safety."

"By the Veil," Jevin sighed in astonishment. "So you did venture into Aster. Even after my warning?"

Jaylin nodded, pleased by the look of wonder on the Prince's face. "It's actually a very comfortable place. I received a three-day pass to cross the Tier. I happened to learn where Kalisha was at this time and contrived to meet her."

"The Tier of Aster. I thought that's where she went." Jevin nodded, looking down on the floor. "That was my first suspicion."

"You knew?" Jaylin asked, his eyes narrowing.

Jevin smiled wanly. "I had my suspicions, Jaylin, but not a motive. Rather than telling you to look in Aster first, I wanted to see what you could do on your own." He pursed his lips. "Given the results, I do not regret that decision at all. If you'd gone to Aster first, you may have missed your encounter with the Mark." He smiled smugly. "You're not my lapdog, Jaylin. I wanted you to find her on your own. It's a good leadership trait, isn't it?"

Jaylin laughed. "Have you seen her letter then?"

The Prince nodded. "Davin-Noll shared it with me last night in his chamber. You did a very... compassionate thing, Jaylin. He's been heartsick since Advent not knowing what became of her. He is furious with Jorganon, though. That letter sealed Alvaron's doom. Now, I don't know where in the Tier of Aster she is. But that does not matter now. I know her pretty well. She won't be coming back. Tell me, though. Is she well?"

"Well enough," Jaylin replied. "She left under difficult circumstances."

"True. I don't blame her for fleeing Premye. Given the nature of the burdens, it was probably wise. Now answer this," Jevin leaned forward hungrily, his eyes gleaming. "What do you know about the man who jumped off Runner's Bridge?"

Jaylin beamed. "You've heard then?"

"Just last night. It takes a day or so for wild rumors to reach my ears, but I like to keep thinking I'm informed. That was you?"

"Lady Minya set a trap for me on Runner's Bridge. Using legion sheriffs. The only way out

was to climb up on a roof and jump off. I almost drowned, I'll confess, but I made it to Dry Dock."

Jevin shook his head. "Only one out of four survives a jump from Runner's Bridge. You truly are exceptional. If my motion passes the King's Will, the Espion will own and control that bridge. Your experience there adds to my argument. Again, thank you."

"After a little swim, I made it to the Bright Well. But I was exhausted. That night, Lady Minya surrounded us. She sent Halesowen and his mystaqua brigade to capture me."

Jevin's eyes flared with anger. He shook his head. "She broke the truce, Jaylin. Not me. And you went below, into the sewers to escape? That's what Riveyra said."

"A most unpleasant experience. We lost Corondin down there. Reonna rescued us, though." He looked at her and smiled, watching her flush.

Jevin smiled at her. "I'm grateful she did."

"And if you've spoken to Riveyra, you know the rest."

Jevin leaned forward thoughtfully. "I'm sure you'll be interested to know that the Bright Well survived Halesowen's raid. In fact, Halesowen was killed, a crossbow shaft in the eye. The legion sheriffs have no authority there, and they know it. The Provost of Minya has heard about it, and Retkonen has profusely apologized, has promised to punish the entire mystaquan brigade for it. They then sent a runner by horseback to alert me you were coming. We watched the roads and my Estate for you." Jevin sighed wearily. "I'm exhausted just hearing your tale, Jaylin. You've done more that I could have hoped for. You've added fire to the blood of Minya once again. I know the king will reward you for the message you brought from Kalisha. I also would like to reward you for your service to the Espion. But I feel impressed also to caution you."

Jaylin cocked his head.

Jevin leaned forward. "You said a little renown is a good thing. There are troubles that come with it as well. You are now well known, Jaylin Warnock. I've heard your name whispered more times in the last day than nearly any other. Not even Lady Minya achieved such open notoriety. If you are Espion, if you are to represent me and to bear my authority, then I must insist that you wear my ring as well. You don't have to wear it always, for everyone to see, but I think you will need it. For your own protection. Jorganon has friends and allies." He gazed deeply into Jaylin's eyes. "I want to give you the freedom you would like as an Atabyrion, to operate within the bounds of your conscience and your creativity. But I also have need of someone like you in the leadership of the Espion. Wess and Riveyra both spoke highly of you. That they'd follow you into the sewers again if need be." He paused. "Originally, I wanted to keep you near me, in the Tier of Premye. But now I think you would do better even farther away. At least until this issue with Jorganon has been settled."

Don't send me back to Abyri, Jevin. "And?"

"I've discussed this with Guyaume." He chewed on his lip. "I'd like to make you the new master of the Bright Well, to replace Roth Spanyer."

Jaylin was stunned.

"You would be responsible for the Espion within the Tier of Minya and Runner's Bridge. But before I give this to you, I want to ask what you want. Consider a pay increase given. Is there another Tier you would like to serve?"

"You're serious, aren't you?" Jaylin asked, his eyes widening. "The Bright Well?"

Jevin smiled broadly. "I can tell by your eyes that you want it. After talking with Reonna, I thought you would. You have a fondness for that Tier that quite defies me. And there are a lot of crowds. It will be easier to stay hidden down there."

"I'll take it." Jaylin said, pleased almost beyond words. "I have developed ...a certain fondness for that place. But can it be under the condition of a possible reassignment in the future? You never

know what may come up."

"Of course," Jevin agreed. "You've become rather an important key to the Espion's future success. I certainly don't want to limit you. My dear friend, you've been to nearly every Tier in Minya, made contacts some Espion only dream of. I have to attribute that to the strength of your Atabyrion personality. Frankly, Guyaume and I cover Premye and part of Lunis. We've lacked strong leadership in the Tier of Minya for quite a while now. I want someone I can trust down there, someone close to the Tier of Aster, to keep an eye on Lady Minya's activities."

"That's good to know. There are some things I need to learn first. Like your secret language and how to use a blade." He winked. "Though I am going to get Thasos to help with that."

Jevin grinned. "Of course. Espion training takes place in every Tier. Typically, a new Espion would travel all over the City, visiting the masters and learning their trade. Down at the Bright Well, you already know Wess and Riveyra – have earned their respect. I'll ask Riveyra to cover the Bright Well while you're gone. He's very responsible and knows the Tier almost as well as Spanyer did. And you don't have to live at the Bright Well if you don't want to. You'll earn enough from me to afford your own residence if you choose."

"I'll be more than happy to wear the sign of the Espion. When do I get my ring?"

"It so happens," Jevin replied, reaching into his pocket, "That I brought one with me." He handed Jaylin the beautifully sculpted ring. "Just twist the signet and the gem color changes, showing you to be not only a trusted agent of the King's Will, but also a member of the Espion." Jaylin took the ring and tried it on his finger. It fit well.

"You know that Jorganon killed Jonas Broan, don't you?" Jaylin said. "For that alone, I want him dead. There's Ethen, too. I owe her for him."

"I've had their souls burned to Aster. They both served me well."

"I'll need men like that down at the Bright Well."

"Of course. I'll introduce you again to the chief of my errands, Kobus. We'll keep in close contact, Jaylin. Now, I think I've kept him waiting long enough. Before the King's Will begins, my brother would like to speak to you."

* * *

Jaylin followed Jevin outside the room. They were escorted by six guards, each wearing the Prince's symbol. Jaylin felt important, like a new man. His face stung, but he felt his stomach bubbling with pride. As he passed the servants of others, he noticed that he was attracting stares. Rumor had a thousand tongues. He wondered what they were thinking. He smiled to some of them. The moon always rises, he thought reminiscently. As do Minyan taxes and the tide.

They reached the council chamber of Davin-Noll Tousann, next to the chapel where the King's Will was held. Jevin knocked and opened the door.

"Davin? You asked to see Master Warnock."

"Let him come, Jevin. Thank you." It was a sad voice. Jevin opened the door and offered it to the young Atabyrion, but did not enter with him. "You deserve this," Jevin whispered and gave him a wink, shutting the door softly.

Sitting in a high-backed chair, without the ceremonial robe of state, the Sovereign of Minya looked sick and weary. Davin-Noll had rich black hair, struck with gray, but his scalp was bare in spots. A thick curly beard covered his mouth, one that hid expressions. But his eyes were mournful, pained. His left hand twitched.

"Come over here, lad. Welcome to the City. I'm Davin-Noll Tousann."

Jaylin dropped to one knee, but the Sovereign waved him up, looking annoyed.

He rose, a little awkwardly, and then smiled at Jaylin. His arms were muscular, but some extra weight had settled around his belly. "Please, sit down here with me. I don't have much time. Are you thirsty?"

"Actually yes," Jaylin replied humbly. A servant fetched him a goblet of spicy mead. He sipped it.

Davin-Noll strummed his fingers on the thick oak table. "Did...did you actually see her?" he asked, his voice trembling.

"Yes," Jaylin answered. "Yes, I did, your Majesty."

"Is she...does she look well?"

Jaylin took another sip. "She looks well enough after all she's been through."

"Ahh," the king replied, shaking his head. "Will you...will you tell me where she is? I'd like so much...to see her again."

Jaylin sighed. "Well, my lord, it's no secret that she's in the Tier of Aster."

"Aster," he murmured. "Yes, that does make sense, doesn't it?" He sighed again, long and slow. "She went where she would be safe from the politics of Premye." He shook his head, stabbed the air with a coughing chuckle. "It's appropriate isn't it? Especially now that Jorganon's asked for sanctuary. How can I defend her right...and not his?" He rubbed his eyes and shook his head. "And Radamistus says she's already sworn the oath."

"I'm sorry I can't give you much more than that," Jaylin said. "But I gave her my word that I wouldn't tell anyone. Not even you."

The king nodded, held up his hand. His eyes filled with tears. He coughed, a violent hacking cough. "I miss her…" he said, mostly to himself. "I miss her laugh the most. She has such a pretty laugh."

Jaylin felt awkward seeing the man's pain. He was the only connection the king had to her.

"Kalisha is a remarkable woman, very rare. Let me offer this, though. I'm certain I can find her if I went back. What if I visited her? Maybe I could arrange something for you. I can't make any promises, but for the Sovereign of Minya, I would be willing to risk it."

The king's eyes gleamed, and he smiled broadly. "You are a deep man, Jaylin Warnock." A smile twitched on his mouth, one full of pain, but also hope. "The next King's Will is scheduled to occur on the Isle of Aster." He scratched his neck, and the hair bristled. "I could meet her secretly, just for a moment. Do you think...do you think you could arrange it?"

"I will try, your Majesty. I do not know if she will meet with you...but I promise you that I will try."

He beamed. "That is all I ask of you. Now, I did want to thank you for your efforts, for the danger you faced in my service, and for the note you brought to me." He handed Jaylin a sheaf of parchment. "You have served the King's Will considerably since your arrival to the City of Minya. Take this to my treasurer. It is a note valid for two thousand dyx."

Jaylin's jaw dropped. "Your Majesty!"

Davin-Noll smiled. "I reward those who serve me, even if they work for my brother. Remember that, Jaylin. I'm giving you this money for another reason also."

"What is that?"

"Kalisha's home in Median is sitting there, vacant. I would like you to hold it for her, in case she changes her mind. I have leased it for three more years, and I'd rather it not go to waste. You can use it, until she returns, if you desire."

Jaylin was stunned. "I...I don't know what to say. I would be honored."

There was a thump on the door nearby. "The congregation has assembled," the king sighed. "Thank you again, Jaylin. Until we meet again."

Jaylin bowed low and then retreated through the door he had entered from. Jevin greeted him, his eyebrows raised.

"You look like a man just sent to the gallows. Aren't you pleased?"

"Pleased? Astounded! Your brother is very generous, Jevin." Jaylin folded up the note and put it in his pocket. "Before the King's Will starts...can I see Radamistus?"

"You can try," Jevin replied with a shrug. "Follow me. Let's see if he'll meet with you."

They entered the Chapel of Aster within Shallic Palace. It was teeming with people. Jevin whispered something to one of the Espion who nodded and went down the eastern aisle.

"Follow me," Jevin motioned to Jaylin, taking him to one of the eastern cloisters. They entered the darkened alcove. "Wait here," he instructed. "If Radamistus will see you, he'll come from the hidden door right there."

Jaylin nodded and sat on a cushioned stone bench inside the alcove. Jevin's men guarded the cloister. The sound rumbled as people chattered and talked about the excitement. The banner of Alvaron had been stripped away, and the next Mark's raised in its place. Looking up, the king's throne was still empty. After several minutes, a crack appeared in the hidden door.

"Master Warnock?" a voice whispered. "Come this way."

Jaylin stood and went to the hidden door. Within the shadows, he saw a dimly lit lamp, and several men wearing the robes of the Nasturtium. He recognized their design instantly. He did not see Radamistus. "Can I see the Deconeus?"

"I am here," a deep voice rasped. "Enter."

Jaylin nodded and slipped quietly into the alcove corridor. He was surrounded by six Nasturtium, and he saw the seventh man, tall and foreboding. Radamistus was angular, his chin strong. His hair was gray but his eyes full of fire. He was over sixty, but strong and sinewy. His eyes probed knowingly, reading in Jaylin more than what was on his face.

Jaylin felt a tingling pit in his stomach and his mouth went dry.

"What have you tell me, Master Warnock?" Radamistus whispered in a deep rich voice. "Or shall I let your thoughts tell me?"

"As an Atabyrion, I always say what I am thinking," Jaylin replied. "For better or worse." He shrugged. "You can judge whether what I speak is the truth or not."

"I will," Radamistus replied, nodding with approval. "I do."

"First, and I believe the most important, I wanted to thank you."

Radamistus' eyebrows rose.

"The Tier of Aster is beautiful. And you have taken good care of Kalisha."

"What did you expect Aster would do with the King's mistress? Punish her for her sins?"

Jaylin held up his hands. "I cannot speculate what the god would do. Only what you did. I know the King would thank you himself if he could."

The rumbling sound in the audience hall grew louder and Radamistus glanced down the hallway. "I do not have much time."

"I'll be brief. Second, Dragan works for the Mark of Alvaron, but your headsman will tell you that when you return, if he hasn't already."

"You've spoken to one of my headsmen?" Radamistus asked darkly.

"Yes, just prior to my return here. It doesn't seem he's contacted you yet. Don't worry, he will. I just wanted you to know that Jorganon was behind Dragan's actions."

Radamistus nodded. "I appreciate your candor, Master Warnock. Do you know who his target

is?"

Jaylin shrugged. "I can only speculate, and I believe you would prefer the truth."

"I do. Is that all?" He turned to leave.

"I just wanted to say that it is a privilege to meet you, Deconeus."

Radamistus smiled coldly. He paused at the doorframe. "I also have the pleasure of making your acquaintance, Master Warnock. Believe me, I will not forget you. Should you desire to visit the Tier of Aster again, please come to the Isle and appear at my manor house on the east end. I would be happy to entertain you and speak more at length. But the King's Will begins, and I must seek to repair the damage you created yesterday before it ended." He said the last words benevolently, yet in a tight whisper. Jaylin couldn't read his eyes. Not at all. Radamistus started to leave.

"One last thing, if I may," Jaylin interrupted. "Thank your headsman for me one last time. And tell him we will definitely meet again."

Radamistus did not turn around. "I will carry your words, Master Warnock. Just pray your next meeting will not be while he is acting under his official capacity. Farewell." With a whisper of robes, Radamistus and the six Nasturtium vanished down another cloister. It was a tossed threat, didn't feel very heavy, but Jaylin understood the insinuation. The Espion, after all, were not welcome in the Tier of Aster.

Jaylin slipped out from the cloister. The Sovereign of Minya had arrived and sat in the ceremonial throne. Jevin had taken the place by his side, and Radamistus joined them, still scowling. Jaylin watched Retkonen and the Queen seat themselves, and he shook his head. There was a different energy now, a feeling of a ship heading for the shoals. He waited and listened as the King's Will began. The debate over whether Jorganon could have sanctuary was on everyone's lips. Accusations were made, followed by counter-accusations. Reasons and witnesses were called and attacked with questions. Jaylin caught the blur of a blue cloak and spotted Thasos approaching him.

"I happen to know," the captain of the Queen's Guard whispered, "where the king keeps his best mead. And it's not far from this very spot."

"You're suggesting we abandon the King's Will?" Jaylin asked, eyebrows arching.

"I think we have more important things to talk about in the kitchen," Thasos replied with a grin. "Like this jump off Runner's Bridge. I'm beginning to think you don't take any of my warnings seriously." He gave an exaggerated sigh. "Come on. The Queen will forgive me one afternoon. And right now, Jevin will forgive you anything."

The two Atabyrions left the Chapel of Aster in Shallic Palace and all the dizzying commotion dancing within it.

The End of Tears of Minya

Leave a message for this story.

Continued from page 27
here, don't you?"

"I don't know! I don't know anymore," The Lady Portia sat back, looking at the ceiling. They sat like this for nearly a minute.

"Misha," Collins said finally. "If this works, no one will ever care whether Clement Reeber ever had possession of the Coss artifacts. Who does he think he is--trying to keep those relics? Pertinacious nouveau riche!"

Silence.

"Please, Misha. I need to know what Polyphemus thinks. I've got to have its support before I go public with my discovery--before Reeber has a chance to put things together on his own. Imagine what would happen to me--to us--if he announces that *he* has the artifacts that can stop Procyx! How can we possibly retain any sort of influence in the community with that hick solving the Mhyrnian mystery *ahead* of us?"

The Lady Portia found herself suddenly very sleepy, and a little nauseated. By now, she was only half listening.

"Misha!" Collins said sharply. She opened her eyes, annoyed, staring at him.

"WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM ME?!"

"What does Polyphemus think?! I've got the answer to the Mhyrn Artifacts *and* destroying Procyx! I know I do! Will Polyphemus back me up?"

The Lady Portia fidgeted, anxious--desperate. She sighed, finally. Perhaps it was time she told someone. She got up, filled her glass again and returned to her seat. This time she sipped the wine, savoring it.

"I . . ." she sighed deeply, struggling for resolve. The alcohol gave it to her. "I don't know. Polyphemus hasn't spoken to me in years."

There! She had said it, and suddenly the weight of darkness that lived inside her seemed to go several shades lighter. For the first time in years she felt the return of probability, not just possibility that some day she might yet hear its gentle, quiet, peaceful power in her heart again.

"So?" he was disturbingly cheerful. "Well. Then at least he can't be against it. Silence *is* the same as accession, isn't it?

She brooded, not hearing him. She *did* have a sudden impression concerning the press release Collins planned for tomorrow. With an odd blend of reluctance and urgency, the Lady Portia told Collins exactly what she felt. "I think you're premature to go public with this--Clement Reeber or no."

She picked it up and scanned it again. The announcement planned to demonstrate that Collins had discovered that the Mhyrn artifacts were designed to respond directly and immediately to the piercing tone Procyx's appearance had wrought on everything and anything made of metal within fifty parsecs. The press release would then explain that this tone was probably a kind of shock wave created by the stress on time and space, which Procyx had created when it had appeared. That shock wave rolled across the continuum, manifesting itself by setting the metal hulls of any nearby space craft into a vibrant chiming, like the sound a goblet makes when a wet finger is pulled around and around its brim. The Lady Portia couldn't help but think of it as a kind of bizarre, sonic heralding of Procyx's arrival.

Collins' press release would demonstrate this effect before the cameras by his striking a tuning fork, which would cause the Coss artifacts to perform their magic. He would then show by graphs and charts that the tone of the tuning fork nearly perfectly matched the sounding tone of Procyx's appearance--nearly perfectly but not precisely. He then closed by saying that using sensitive recordings of the actual phenomenon, Collins planned to unleash the powers of Mhyrn's ancient, super science and end Procyx once and forever.

"And tell me again--why wouldn't you play actual recordings of the Procyx tone for the cameras instead of a cheap tuning fork and then showing some vague graphs the public will promptly forget about in seconds, anyway?"

Collins' expression became defensive. "I'd just as soon discover how the artifacts respond to that pure tone in a secure, private setting—no public cameras! The tuning fork is similar to the Procyx tone, but it is not identical. If the artifacts are designed to perform a more precise function at the sounding of the *precise* sound of Procyx's appearance, I'd just as soon be the only one watching it when it happens—*and* ahead of the press release."

He took another deep drag on his pipe, holding it. The Lady Portia barely kept from rolling her eyes. He let out the smoke, musing absently, "I'll want to set up the test off world well away from here or any of the stars." He shook his head. "No one can guess what it will do. The orb's made of solid pluridium. There's enough in it to take out half the planet if it chooses to dissolve. In any event, I suspect the Coss stone will do something more than just *float in the air*."

The dark heaviness deepened in the Lady Portia. Her cynicism clawed up inside her again, revealing a skeptical old witch. She saw herself that way for the first time and hated it. She lashed out loudly so she wouldn't have to face reality.

"So why at the Gates did you give the artifacts back to Reeber?" And then, unbidden, she recalled the feeling that had flooded over her when Reeber had pleaded with her to tell them who should have the artifacts after the morning council meeting. Now, for the first time, the Lady Portia recognized that the intense feeling she had had was a prompting to affirm that Reeber *should* be the one to keep the artifacts--a prompting from Polyphemus!

She trembled with the beginnings of a renewed shade of hope. That prompting had been the first message Polyphemus had given her in years. And she felt sick that she had allowed her loyalty to Collins to shut her mouth on the matter. She remembered with pain and regret that years earlier no one could have scared her into keeping her mouth shut when Polyphemus had given her a message. Perhaps if she had spoken this morning, Polyphemus might now, even now, be speaking to her again--reassuring her again--sharing its deepest wisdom and marvelous visions with her again. She ached for the return of that intensely rich intimacy--that incredible joy that was swollen with pure, innocent delight, a delight that never grew old or tired. It only invigorated, replenished--a feeling that was freshly wondrous each time it came to her. She hardly heard Collins' answer.

"What could I do? Who the Gates assigned a class two negotiator to him?"

"Hmm?" The Lady Portia answered, looking up. Deep inside her, a feeling was gradually coalescing into a conscious thought. Part of her resisted, hated and feared it. The rest of her clamored for it to come--yearned for the return of what its implications could mean to her as well as restore to her. She put the drink down.

"Listen to me!" Collins all but barked at her. "I *had* to give Reeber the artifacts tonight. I really couldn't deny them. It wouldn't have been . . . seemly." Then he smiled. "This Thorl woman slipped up, though. She asked for Hastings to help." Collins laughed once. "Imagine, Hastings helping him after what Reeber did to him. Still, I've got to hand it to fat-boy. He can sure stir up a fuss for a hick!" Then Collins fell serious. "And that's why I'm going public with the press release at dawn--before he has a chance to make any announcements of his own about the artifacts. By then I can invoke the Official Secrets Act, if need be. That'll keep him quiet."

The Lady Portia struggled beneath a twisting of heaviness --a kind of sick heaviness at what Collins had just said. He went on.

"I'll have Merrimoor here by then, too. Once *he* comes into the picture there's not a fuming thing Reeber can do to keep the artifacts. I just got off a tranz with an informant I keep in the

Mhyrnian embassy. It seems that, over the years he's lived here, our fine Chief and ambassador has, shall we say, snared himself in a few more of our civilized indulgences than his fellow chiefs back home would find acceptable. My informant assures me that Merrimoor would be more than willing to share the…how shall I say it . . . the benefits of this discovery with us. I'm sure he realizes that without us, the significance of the Coss artifacts might never have been found."

"And what about Hastings' solution to Procyx? The Vanguards' focusing of negative gravity?"

"To be quite honest with you, I'm getting more twitchy about that all the time. Reeber may well be right on that call. I know the Gelding Mark Eight *is* the best computer modeling system there is. I know it has a near perfect record for accuracy, but this business of not doing tests? It's sloppy science at best--scary at worst."

Collins took a passionate drag from his pipe. "Well, if the Vanguards are successful with this negative graviton pump, I'll announce that at dawn…instead of the Coss artifacts. If they fail, well, I've got the discovery of the century I can announce." He closed his eyes, clenching them for a moment. "You know, it's entirely possible that, somehow, the Mhyrnians do have the answer to the Procyx problem. If so it would be a Burning waste not to be right there with them when they do whatever mumbo-jumbo their old magic does to destroy their End Star. I just want to make sure all our bases are covered."

The Lady Portia only half heard that last sentence. Her mind was racing with a resolve she hardly believed herself.

"So, Polyphemus doesn't speak to you anymore," Collins said. His voice sounded pleased at the prospect. "I can see a lot of interesting possibilities in that. No one has to know he doesn't talk, not for a while. Hmm. You suppose he doesn't hear much anymore, either, eh? You don't suppose he's asleep--or, perhaps, dead?"

The Lady Portia almost gave herself away. Instead, she made herself look away, as though she was ashamed--a condition she now had little trouble hiding. "I don't know," she said finally, then stood up. Somehow, remarkably, there was no dizziness now. Something had swept it away and she felt a remarkable stirring inside her--a long-lost sensation she hardly dared call hope. But there it was, and for a fleeting moment, she was as a child again.

Collins regarded her curiously for a moment. "You will, of course, let me know *if* Polyphemus does start talking to you again?" Collins said with just a hint of threat coloring his voice. "I wouldn't want any surprises at this point in the game."

A game! Was that all this was to him?

"If Polyphemus should speak," The Lady Portia said as evenly as she could manage, picking up her wrap and beginning to put it on. "And Polyphemus' answer to all this was 'no--keep quiet; let Reeber do all the work and get all the recognition'--what would you do?"

Collins took another drag of sweet, smelling smoke. For a long time he stared out the window at the night of the Old World.

"Well, let's cross *that* bridge when we come to it--*if* we should come to it." The smoke curled around his words. "Good night, Misha."

She did not answer but quickly left the penthouse and made her way down the parkway toward the Micah towers. The Lady Portia, for all her sophistication, did not see the woman fall into step behind her. Her mind raced through other things.

II

Celeste Jenson wished the two women would leave her alone. She could feel them watching

her, even in the dark.

"I really am all right," she said to the shadows, her back to them. A moment later, one of the women answered her with a sigh.

"You've had an unusually strong episode, ma'am. We've seen others who've gone into a coma after a lot less from Polyphemus than you've had. We can't allow that to happen with you. Your extrapolator and intentor skills are much too valuable, and you're urgently needed. If you begin to go into a coma, Kara, here, can pull you back--if we catch it early enough. Do you understand? That's why we have to stay. Sorry."

Celeste sat up. The oppression had returned again. She had been unable to shake for nearly a week, now.

"What is it?" The voice of the other woman asked. "Are you dizzy?"

"I'm fine!" Celeste shook her head, annoyed at this ongoing interruption. "Can't you leave me alone? Please! I promise I won't go anywhere. Besides, where would I go?"

She heard whispering.

"Five minutes," The first woman said quietly. "Call us if you feel anything unusual."

"I promise," Celeste reassured them. She stood up and made her way carefully to the window. She heard them leave quietly.

The veranda opened out onto one of the great, forested parkways of this incredible city. Night reigned undisputed now, and a cool, fragrant breeze caressed her exposed skin from the direction of the woods.

Her emotions were so close to the surface that the moment she felt the two women go, she wanted to curse and cry and laugh, all at once. Recollection of the flood of images she had seen when the Vanguard Cygnus had brought her here made her whole frame shudder, even just remembering how powerfully they had struck her. She dared not go over them again in her mind, for she knew fully that unconsciousness would quickly take her down once more.

But there was one image she did allow herself to entertain. It was a disquieting picture she returned to over and over again, like tonguing a sore in one's mouth.

In the vision she had seen Aaron her son and her husband standing waist-deep in swirling, black water. The ground shuddered, trees fell and tornadoes ripped a lightning tortured horizon behind them. Celeste had reached out for them, but her husband had lifted his hand to stop.

"We have to leave you, Cele," he had said. "We have to go now," and the water had swirled up until they were lost beneath its churning anger.

In that brief black moment, Celeste knew that her husband and son were dead. She sucked in a deep, quivering breath and shook her head, as if trying to free herself from the feeling. There had been no reports of them dying, not even an MIA report. But they had been gone so long, shuttling refugees to safety from doomed planets, often under the shadow of Hypermotility—yes the bizarre storms and the ruining of planets. Well the shadow must finally have had its way with them or was at least linked to their deaths! It could well be that what she had seen was them dying.

"Please, no," she whispered so quietly she was not even aware she had voiced her fears. The terror that they might really be dead did not diminish. She allowed herself tears, waiting for some sort of reassurance that they were all right after all. She waited and waited and nothing came.

Yet, beneath it all there did whisper the slightest promise of peace. Peace? Peace at death? It didn't figure. Her eyes blurred. People died. Everyone died. She knew the risks when she married a man who loved the military. Their son had inherited that love, too. She could accept their deaths—maybe. But the years that stretched out ahead for her would be laden with loneliness. *That* was what would be hard. Recognition surprised her a little, that the fear of loneliness was more terrifying to her

than the fear that they were dead.

She took a deep breath. "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof." Where had she read that? The wording suggested deep antiquity. It was a fragment of some greater philosophy of which only fragments remained. It seemed to fit here.

"Lady Jenson," Kara's voice spoke softly from behind her. Celeste quickly brushed her cheeks with her thumbs and turned around.

"Yes?"

"Someone is here to see you."

Fear and anguish slammed through Celeste's body. This must be it--word of their deaths. Loneliness assured! People grieved death, but that sorrow was not so much for the one that died. The sorrow was for the ones who survived, struggling to make their way into an unsure future alone. She struggled against the wave of terrible grief and fear and anger that burned through her body. Somehow, she managed to answer in a strong voice.

"Of course. Please send him in. I am ready for him."

But from behind Kara, her face lost in the shadow of her silhouette, a young woman came into the room. She wore loose clothing and was struggling to breathe calmly--nearly out of breath."

"I've served papers to have you released," the young woman said. "You need to come with me." She stepped into the moonlight that came through the window.

Celeste knew her at once, though she had never met her--knew her from the visions of Polyphemus. All at once, she felt the awful burden of grief drain away--at least for the moment. In its place, there now blazed intense resolve and, incredibly, physical strength and eagerness. Celeste grabbed for her jacket and followed the young woman out past her guards. She never had any doubt that that was what they were.

The older "nurse", the one who had told her again and again that her gifts were too valuable for them to let her go, held a collection of papers in her hand. It was obvious to Celeste that the woman was flustered, confused, even angry with all this, but found herself powerless to do anything but let her go.

Celeste paused for a moment, asking if she could see one of the papers. Grudgingly, the woman gave it up to her. Celeste had only to look at printing, not even at the words, and she knew the intent of serving them--that accompanying this familiar stranger was right. The conviction burned in a kind of exciting, joyful certainty in her. *This was right*.

She did not remember giving the paper back or remember going down the lift to the surface or climbing into the little ground car. All she could see was a glowing, lavender sphere and plate of metal, with glowing symbols of incredible power. Blazing through them was the first sense of real hope she had felt in years.

III

Reeber stepped out onto the balcony. Behind him, Hastings huddled over the Coss sphere, conversed with the Gelding Mark Eight, or more specifically, shouted at it. Reeber tried to tune it out but could not.

"What the Gates do you mean you can't break the coding?" Hastings almost literally frothed at the terminal.

"I cannot decipher the atomic coding beyond the second level," the computer replied calmly.

"And why not?"

"The ciphering seems to be based on a subtly structured, chaotic, self-permutating formula

similar in some ways to Sullivan's three-body equation. Attempting to balance the equation demands continuous adjustment along the Nosalian constant by an inverse function involving an imaginary number whose value I cannot determine. The moment I begin trying to derive that number, the application of one or more of the *base* values alters, apparently randomly. It is therefore currently impossible to superimpose meaning on any of the Pluridium's atomic locking arrays."

"Keep it simple, please. Doctor Reeber is neither a mathematician nor a physicist!" Hastings shook his head, bewildered. "So what you're saying is there's no way to get a look inside the orb on the atomic level?

"Correct."

"And you're sure that the orb's arrangement of pluridium atoms are, in fact, deliberate structures and not just exotically random?

"Of that there can be no question," the computer sounded almost hurt.

"How long do you think it will take to derive a workable function, structured or chaotic?"

"I have made several thousand trillion attempts. Recently I have even employed the highly controversial Wawernia and Charlifu introspections, and can still find no symbolisms."

"You *are* certain that the organization of the atoms is the result of intelligent, deliberate structuring?"

"You are rephrasing an earlier question. I am absolutely certain."

"Remarkable."

"Should I continue trying to decipher it?"

"Gates, yes! Why not?"

"It's just that based on previous attempts, working at maximum capacity, I calculate a probability of success at one event in eighteen billion years."

Hastings laughed without humor.

Reeber could keep quiet no longer and interjected his own question. "You are saying that had you started at the beginning of the universe, deciphering continually until this moment, you might still never have found a solution?"

"I thought I had said that, yes."

Hastings threw up his hands. "Can't you create a model based on probabilities of meaning?"

"Given proper data, I could. But my understanding was that you did not wish to consider any current cultural data."

"Can you blame me?" he scolded the computer. "How old is the orb?"

"Dating precision is impossible, of course, but the orb is at least seventeen billion years old."

"Precisely my point! What's the likelihood that anything in a modern culture can even remotely relate to a culture some seventeen billion years removed?"

"Nil, based on modern cultural evolution rates. Because we only have an actual data sampling of seventeen thousand years to work with, any reliable connection is rendered impossible. A sample of seventeen thousand years represents only about one ten thousandth of one percent of the estimated age of the universe. Scientifically, that is not a reliable or even significant sampling."

"There you have it!" Hastings laughed. "We're at a complete stop."

"Maybe on this path," Reeber said. "Let's try a different approach." He walked over to the artifacts. "Have you noticed that the orb always stands upright?"

Hastings looked at him. "Whatever are you talking about?"

Reeber walked over to the orb. "I just discovered it a little before you came." He picked up the orb from beneath the scanner and deliberately placed it on its side. "Now, this is the really odd part. You and I can stare at it and stare for as long as we choose, and nothing happens. But if we look away

. . . Let's try it. Turn around, please."

"You can't be serious!" Hastings wore the face of a man who had just been ordered to remove all his clothes and put them back on, inside out.

"Do it," Reeber said, turning his back on the thing himself. Hastings scowled but turned his back. A moment later, Reeber turned around again.

The orb lay as he had left it--on its side.

"I don't understand," Reeber said.

Hastings took it more personally. "That finishes it!" he spewed like a spoiled musician in the depths of a tantrum. "I have better things to do with my time, *and* my equipment, than spend it with pseudo-scientists like you!" He began gathering his things. "Computer, shut down!"

Reeber felt a greater fool than even Hastings had accused him of being. He could say nothing, only stare, disbelieving at the Coss sphere. Hastings began storming toward the door, his beard looking like a child's drawing of an explosion--his face red with anger.

"Wait!" Reeber recovered finally, chasing after him. "I swear the orb righted itself! Something must be different now; different than when I was alone . . ."

"I'll send for the Gelding Mark Eight terminal in the morning!"

"Let me try it one more time!" Reeber pleaded. "Please! As a professional courtesy . . ."

"I will not be made a fool of!"

"Of course not," Reeber finally grabbed at the other's arm. "One more try. It surely couldn't hurt to give it one more try?"

Hastings scowled but nodded. "Very well." He put his things down and went, with Reeber, back to the table. Together they saw the orb.

Had Reeber been able to see himself, he would have been ashamed at the smirk that found its way onto his face.

The orb stood perfectly upright.

"I'll be burned!" Hastings said. "Computer, on--run a complete scan of the Coss sphere and report."

Several seconds later the Gelding Mark Eight spoke. "The orientation of the object is slightly altered from before. But, more importantly, the atomic array of pluridium atoms has changed--significantly enough to invalidate all previous attempts at decoding or symbolization."

"The Burning thing's alive!" Hastings whispered. "Computer, you mentioned that the orientation of the Coss sphere is slightly altered?"

"Yes. There has been a tiny rotation along the "X" axis."

"What I can't understand is why it righted itself now but not earlier," Reeber frowned.

"Correlate this data with the records Dr. Reeber supplied from the Coss notes.

"There is another difference," The Gelding Mark Eight announced. "The symbols in rowed spirals on both top and bottom are significantly different now from the initial scans made by Dr. Coss upon first obtaining the artifact."

Reeber picked up the orb. "He's right. These spirals of large and small asterisks are much closer together than I remember them back home--and there are considerably more of them."

"Run speculative comparison," Hastings said.

"What criteria?"

"All."

"That will take some time."

"How long?"

"It depends upon what I discover."

"Run anyway. I'll interrupt you if I need you."

"As you wish," the Gelding Mark Eight said, and abruptly the monitor and scanner shut down.

Hastings reached immediately for the orb. He examined it with new appreciation. "The Burning thing's alive. The atomic matrix must be a logic defense shell designed to keep anyone from determining what's inside!" He turned to Reeber, his eyes suddenly bright with discovery. "Grief, man! We have here perhaps the greatest scientific discovery of the age! Do you understand the scientific implications of an artifact, older than the universe itself, still functioning and created by a race so obviously advanced beyond us that it would take our best resources literally billions of years to even begin to understand its complexity?"

"The Mhyrnians . . ." Reeber began, but Hastings cut him off.

"Oh, the Mhyrnians are mere heirs to this!"

"I wouldn't be so hasty . . ."

"They're primitives!"

"Now--yes. But I trust you have forgotten, for the moment, that pluridium occurs naturally on Mhyrn"

"No. You brought that quite forcibly to my attention earlier today. So what are you getting at?"

"I am not so sure that the Mhyrnians are as superstitiously blind to artifacts like these as we assume them to be."

"All right." Hastings carried the orb across the room and placed it on the table next to the Coss stone. "I'll entertain that notion for the moment. Tell me what you are thinking."

"The Mhyrnian mythology has, within it, specific prophecies concerning the End Star. Coss' notes recite them in considerable detail. I confess that I am not too familiar with them myself, but I do know that the Mhyrnian prophecy of the Second Procyx--The End Star of Grief--might easily, through its poetic descriptions, chronicle both surrounding phenomenon *and* historical events as they have occurred in our time. Here," he went to his own terminal, calling up a file he only had had a chance to skim before Hastings had arrived. "This is a most sacred chant of the Second Procyx and is sung only by the most high noblemen. These are the words, translated:

"The Infidels from heaven come,
"To tempt and enslave;
"Shall lead away the Holy Men;
"And many to the grave!

"The Guardians shall rise in strength
"The City to make bright!
"The Martyr's son shall slay the same;
"And call forth heaven's blight.

"For Procyx shall, in purest blue,
"Appear with holy song.
"The stars shall die in awesome fright--
"Till Zorl shall right all wrong.

"The Holy Man and Infidel,
"From heaven they shall fall;

"The armies of the Dragon slay--
"Lest Procyx claim us all.

"Twelve mighty Warriors, they shall lead
"The Eye to shine with power;
"The Golden Death of Zorl direct;
"And darken Procyx's glower!"

"The convenient thing about prophecies like this," Hastings wore the face of a skeptic, "is that they are so general and vague that you can find 'fulfillments' all over the place."

Reeber took a deep breath and pressed forward. "Consider, just for a moment, that this Mhyrnian prophecy is true."

"I don't believe anyone can predict the future."

"What about the Mestrates?"

"Well . . ."

"It can happen. It's documented. So, for the sake of argument, let us assume for the moment that this prophecy is an accurate description, albeit poetic or obscure, of events surrounding the days in which we now find ourselves. So ask yourself--how would a being, perhaps alien, looking into our day using methods we cannot imagine and while seeing, perhaps, not understanding our science, cultures or politics, choose to convey what he or she saw?"

Hastings shook his head. "Clearly, through the passage of time, the prophecy could not remain pristine. It would be incredible if it hadn't changed over all that time."

Reeber began pacing as he spoke. "Normally yes, but not *this* prophecy. It is etched in pluridium and is, according to legend, protected by fire from destruction or tampering. I believe *this* prophecy along with others concerning the End Star so stored in pluridium and protected by fire -- whatever that means -- remain pristine--as they were when they were first written.

"But, more importantly, I believe there are specific historical events which have occurred during the time Procyx has existed that could easily correspond to the events identified within the prophecy I just quoted.

"For example, the infidels in the first stanza could well be the pluridium mining concerns that all but took over Mhyrn. Look! *Infidels from the heavens*--space travel was unknown when Federation exploration ships first landed on Mhyrn. The ancients who saw these events had to find a way to express what they saw in such a way that the Mhyrnians of today, who live in a state of primitive technological development, would be able to understand them. Anyway, these mining companies were shown to be responsible for persecuting the Mhyrnian religion and openly attempting to destroy the ancient Mhyrnian culture.

"Here's another one. Just as Procyx appeared, one of the high chiefs of Mhyrn killed his father--a most high nobleman. Ambylor was the name of the Nobleman. The *father* was the martyr, killed by his son—second stanza.

"Third stanza: stars begin to die--Hypermotility.

"Now back to the second stanza. I've heard just lately that the ancient Mhyrnian religion has blossomed into a new, golden age. The pluridium they have in abundance has made them fabulously wealthy, even to the restoring of the ancient religious sites and cities. They have restored the ancient City of Zorl--made it bright again. It is once more the capitol of Mhyrn. The City is made bright, again."

Hastings looked unconvinced but did not challenge Reeber immediately. Reeber decided to

remain quiet while his unwilling colleague thought on all this. It left Reeber time to think himself.

What astonished Reeber most from all this discussion was the nature of the things he was saying.

First, that a billion-year-old prophecy was possible. Second, that the ancient builders of the Coss artifacts really *did* understand Procyx and had gone so far as to prepare a way to protect the galaxy from it now, some seventeen billion years later. Only a week earlier, had someone suggested such a thing to Reeber, his reaction would have been one of ridicule. He understood Hastings' posture perfectly.

But since discovering the reality of the Vanguards and his experience upon entering Polyphemus, Reeber no longer felt so sure of himself or of many, if not all, the popular scientific fads of the day. Certainly they had been espoused by well meaning scientists. But the fad part took them beyond postulation. They were boldly treated as though they were facts. While propagated by attractive, scientific rhetoric, they were too often tossed around as if they were absolutes, when perhaps they should remain qualified. Such practices were, unfortunately, all too common among far too many scientists. Unfortunately, anyone who opposed them was accused of pseudo science, a virtual death sentence to any scientist.

"And it shouldn't be!" Reeber muttered. It was a frightening reality--frightening because, in the end, it served only the careers of scientists, while simultaneously disserving the search for truth. That search should reign supreme as the actual goal of pure science, free from persecution, politics and personalities.

"There is more of this prophecy that you have not linked to current events," Hastings said, turning to look at him.

Good. The man's mind was not yet closed. Reeber carefully pressed forward. "I can't know specific current events on Mhyrn. Could we know them, we might *find* more fulfillments. Or, it could be that unrecognized events remain to be fulfilled. I don't know. Maybe it's some of both."

Hastings threw up his hands. "All right! When I see how the Coss sphere can still function so precisely after seventeen billion years and that we cannot begin to comprehend the science it demonstrates, I find myself intrigued. Dr. Reeber, I am willing to entertain the possibility that the ancient fashioners of these objects *might* have been able to see into the future.

"But, clearly, they were not Mestrates! They couldn't have been. If they saw ahead it couldn't be by some superstitious miracle-making ritual, but only by means of some repeatable technology. Super technology, if you will, and *only* through technology."

Reeber shrugged. It least it was a beginning. He, himself, thought it premature to so quickly dismiss metaphysics from such a discussion. So little was understood. Still, he voiced nothing of these feelings to Hastings. Not yet.

"Dr. Hastings?" The Gelding Mark Eight interrupted softly. Both Hastings and Reeber jumped.

"What is it?"

"I wish to perform an experiment with the Coss sphere."

"Of course," Hastings smiled. "You have something?"

"An idea. Please take the Coss sphere out of the room and down the hall. My scanner will follow you. When you have removed it the proper distance, I will tell you."

Without hesitation, Hastings picked up the artifact and headed for the door. Reeber followed quickly. The floating scanner moved smoothly along side them.

"Here," it said abruptly. "Place it on the floor. Turn your backs for a moment. I will also shut down for a like interval, then scan the orb again."

"Why do you need to shut down?" Hastings asked.

"I want you to watch what the sphere does while our backs are turned. The artifact, apparently, resists correcting its attitude if anything is watching--living or mechanized," the computer responded.

"But why would it do that?"

The Gelding Mark Eight did not respond. Reeber had his own idea: to protect its secrets and powers from the eyes of unbelievers. Hastings put the orb down and, standing, turned. Reeber followed.

"I am shutting down. Do not turn around until I tell you."

They waited.

"My idea was correct."

Hastings and Reeber turned back. The hovering scanner projected a diagram of the Coss sphere in the air. Various orientations of the artifact were highlighted as it spoke.

"The Coss sphere," the Gelding Mark Eight went on, "is a homing device. It sets its attitude according to its position in relation to the Procyx phenomenon. It tells precisely where Procyx is. The two spirals of symbols on top and bottom are actually numbers expressed in binary. The value on the upper hemisphere that spirals away from the raised, inset blue star jewel at the top of the orb is a binary expression of the exact distance to Procyx in units of 466 angstroms--the precise and only wavelength of light that emanates from the Procyx phenomenon."

"The value of the number spiraling out from the square symbol at the bottom of the sphere is also an expression of the distance from the orb to Procyx. But its unit of measurement is in sound wavelengths--466 cycles per second. That is the wavelength of the musical tone that resonated instantaneously in anything metallic within fifty parsecs of Procyx when it first appeared."

"Tone?" Reeber asked, perplexed and excited. "What do you mean tone?"

Hastings hushed him into momentary silence.

"Of the thirteen triangles inset in the center band at the equator of the sphere, none ever change position or attitude except for the topaz jeweled triangle, here. It always points in the direction of Procyx."

"The Coss sphere is a compass that always points to Procyx. If followed, it can lead any ship capable of warp speed directly to Procyx from anywhere in the galaxy—perhaps farther."

"What is this tone you are referring to?" Reeber cut in again. "What does it sound like?"

Hastings turned to scowl at Reeber for the interruption. Instead, his eyes widened at something in amazement. Reeber turned to follow his gaze. There, lying on the floor, not more than a few meters away, was the Coss stone.

But they had not brought it out with them.

I V

Morse's ship dropped out of white drive and began to move among the countless planetary fortresses that hovered above the limb of Polyphemus. He released the controls, and the fighter moved started off on its own accord.

The ships of light could not be said to be sentient, as the Vanguards were, but they *did* possess certain traits shared by living things. Among these were innate behaviors, which often made them seem alive--autonomic responses to crisis, for example, which closely resembled the fundamental drive for self-preservation in living organisms. The almost instinctive action Morse's vessel now took was one such behavior. He had heard of other ships of light, while engaged in important missions, taking complete control of their own actions at certain times and under certain, specific conditions-

-all but ignoring their pilots. He had heard of such things, but he had never actually experienced it first hand until now.

He remembered from his decades old training on the operation of these ships that the nature of these *life-like* behaviors pointed to Polyphemus as the ultimate, overseeing source. It was understood that Polyphemus seemed to govern all the special Mestrate ships of power--the Vanguards, the ships of light, and other rarely seen vessels. It was then speculated that, for reasons of its own, Polyphemus could instill within these ships powerful, self-regulating functions designed to insure that the specific ends of important missions were achieved. Of course, no one knew any of this for sure.

Morse flew among the planetary fortresses. Of the literally hundreds of millions of them -- fortresses of immense power that masqueraded as gas giant planets -- many had acquired and kept real moons and vagabond planetoids. These satellites, which the fortresses had either deliberately or inadvertently collected over centuries of travel and duty, were maintained in orbit about their hosts. They turned out to be such nice window dressing. Gas giants always had a lot of moons. The satellite families were even carried with the fortresses in and out of hyperspace, so that when the they needed to move into tactical or strategic service within troubled planetary systems, the fortresses would appear merely wandering planets, captured by the gravitational pull of that system's central star.

Morse marveled at the wide variety of planetary design he saw. The fortresses were as varied in appearance as the real worlds they imitated. All had ring systems, though in the case of these fortresses, the rings were not merely made up of chunks of rock or ice, but organized bands composed of defense screen generators, deep space scanners and tactical, self-aiming blaster arrays. Even compared to the devastating power of the Vanguards and ships of light, these fortresses commanded considerable respect. Morse kept a careful watch not to inadvertently pass so near as to trouble any of them.

A large, exquisitely-colored amber fortress drifted into view directly ahead. Impressive storm simulations wandered across its surface, including a distinctive reddish whirlpool in the Southern Hemisphere. This fortress boasted at least twenty-five moons. That was high, even for a gas giant. It would mean that this fortress was one of the oldest, to have collected so many satellites in its travels.

Morse tried to avert the ship of light but felt it resist. He sighed. So *this* was where he was to go. He tried to imagine how Polyphemus did it. Once he had left the Cygnus, Polyphemus must have accessed the ship's guidance system, locking it somehow to the information conveyed in his dream. The ship of light must then have known where to take him.

The ships of light were permitted unlimited access anywhere in the galaxy. As a result, he could have proceeded anywhere he wished without the slightest concern for what anyone aboard this fortress thought. Even so, Morse opened a courtesy hailing call to the fortress.

"Good morning," he tranzed. "This is Commodore Morse of the Vanguard Cygnus on priority assignment."

A woman's voice answered him pleasantly. "Good morning. This is colonel Ilisha, commanding the Zeus. Defense screens have been adjusted to allow you unlimited passage. Do you wish to disclose your destination, Commodore?"

Morse smiled. "I'll tell you momentarily."

The ship of light screamed past the upper atmosphere of the fortress, heading for a volcanic, rust-covered moon.

"Your moon directly ahead is my destination," Morse said.

"That is the moon we call The Heifer. It is uninhabited, volcanic and dangerous. Are you sure you wish to proceed?"

The ship of light began its descent. "I do. Thank you."

"Zeus out," the tranz was polite, but a bit confused.

Below, the surface looked tortured. Rivers and seas of cooling, molten lava fractured dusty plains pockmarked with craters. Volcanoes threw debris high into the vacuum of space and orange ash fell like snow. The ship of light altered its course, choosing the planet's largest volcano as its destination.

Morse felt an uneasy qualm. The ships of light were amazing vessels, capable of withstanding many of the forces of nature. Even so, he could not imagine that they could endure the temperatures of molten lava. He almost took control of the vessel once more when he felt a strong, undeniable impression not to. Instead, he took a deep sigh, folded his arms and sat back. Chuckling once, her wondered what the crew of the Zeus must be thinking, watching this ship head directly into the mouth of this large volcano.

In spite of himself, Morse clutched the armrests of the pilot's seat as the ship splashed down into the lava, beginning a thrust into the heart of the volcano. A single warning light came on, and in response, the ship of light began to glow as it always did when exerting its incredible array of powers. A moment later the warning light went off.

The ship accelerated, pitching its nose down the throat of the volcano. There wasn't even the slightest jar as boulders and rocks, melting from the heat as they were carried upward, bumped and passed by the ship like flotsam in a glowing river of reds and yellows.

The ship burst from the drifting, molten maelstrom surrounding it into smooth, clear darkness. Or was it darkness? Morse strained to see all around and beneath him, for the ship of light, itself still shining in the brilliance of its power, illuminated the ceilings and wall of an immense cavern. The cavern must have been so large that even the fighter's dazzling illumination soon failed to show much of the surface of the walls. No. That was not it. The fighter's power had fallen away, no longer needing to protect it from the surging lava through which it had just flown.

Morse craned his neck to look behind him. The river of lava flowed sedately upward, as if through the air--a shaft of glowing fire and colors contained within some kind of crystalline-looking web structure. It was as if the drifting river of light were a great pillar of radiance, holding up the ceiling. At various places along the length of this pillar, points of brilliant radiance shone with the brightness of a sun, pouring a comforting illumination into the cavern around it.

The ship of light descended. Incredibly, below him, Morse could see an expansive forest with streams and lakes and then, directly ahead, a large farm meadow, long ago cut out of the timberland. An ancient, medieval-looking structure stood at the center of the farm. Morse had seen structures like this before in ancient records aboard the Metatron--the record-keeping Vanguard. What was it they called these buildings?

"They're called castles," a voice tranzed.

Morse jumped, so flustered that it took him a moment to recover.

"I assume you want to land?"

Morse was still reeling from all this. He managed a nod. "I . . ."

"There is an open space just at the center of the courtyard. Yes, where you are looking even now. Your ship of light should easily fit there."

The vessel did not wait for any prompting from Morse. Less than ten seconds later it rested in the courtyard of the ancient, stone castle. As the engines began to shut down, Morse looked out and saw two children standing on a stairway that led up to the parapets. They gazed at him in silence, their faces sober. The children had high foreheads--their skins wearing a slightly violet tinge.

"Mhyrnians," Morse whispered to himself. The canopy began to open. He undid his restraints and began to climb up out of the ship when something caught his eye--a motion at the large, arching

doorway that led into the main structure. Coming out of the shadows into the perpetual, sunset-like, golden illumination of the cavern was an old, old Mhyrnian dressed in a loose, comfortable-looking smock. He cleaned his hands in a rag, wiping some sort of glowing liquid from them. His long, white beard was braided into several strands and worn about his shoulders like a scarf.

Morse climbed down from the ship of light. As the Mhyrnian approached, Morse suddenly felt a great rush of joy and power from behind him. That was the only way he could describe it. It was like that first time when he, as a boy, had been brought aboard the Vanguard Cygnus. He turned to see the vessel shining. It was unlike any display of power he had ever seen or even heard of from a Ship of Light. Sprays of rainbow brilliance flowed across it in dazzling beauty. Tears welled up in Morse's eyes at its incomparable beauty. This was the joy he had felt in his dream--the overwhelming joy and power of spectral glories that had lifted him into resolved wakefulness.

But what did it mean? What, in fact, was this? He looked back at the Mhyrnian, wondering. Who was this Mhyrnian, that his very presence should draw such an unheard of response from a Ship of Light? He gazed back at it—joyfully mesmerized. He never wanted it to cease. A moment later he forced himself to look back at the old man who now held up his hand. Immediately, the spectral glories of the ship died away.

"Sir . . ." Morse began, his voice thick from emotion and awe. "I . . ."

"I offer you my peace," the Mhyrnian said warmly, then sighed with a heaviness that came from more than old age. It was the same voice that had tranzed him to land in the courtyard. The old Mhyrnian did not wait for Morse to reply. Instead, he coughed a deep, rasping cough. He motioned for Morse to join him, sitting on the lower steps that led up to the parapets. He laid his rag aside. The two boys came up behind the old man on the steps. The younger boy could not be older than four years old. He came forward to sit on his lap. The Mhyrnian took him up and gave him a long, tender embrace and then began stroking the boy's light hair absently.

"So the hour has come, at last--at long last." He laughed once, after a silent moment of introspection. It was a philosophical laugh, accompanied by a nod heavy with some understanding and knowing humor only he seemed to have. "I should have known all along this would come at so difficult a time in my life."

Morse waited in silence.

The old Mhyrnian coughed again, then looked at him. "But it is the way of things more often than not, isn't it?"

"Sir . . . "

"I am Metrasor--a fellow servant; a most high nobleman to the Great God; He whose name is too holy to be spoken, even He who is the King of all Universes--He whom Zorl serves in these terrible days of the End Star of Grief." He coughed. It was a cruel, tortured sound so wretched that, for a moment, Morse wondered whether the man might actually die before his eyes. The Mhyrnian regained control and, managing a resolved smile, hugged the smaller boy to him. "Sir--I and my sons are ready to accompany you."

V

"You didn't mention that the Coss stone was capable of its own motion," Hastings went over to pick it up.

"I've never had them apart before," Reeber followed him. "But what is this tone the computer mentioned? What did it sound like?"

"Bring the orb," Hastings started back down the hall carrying the Coss stone. "Come on,"

He all but jogged back down into the suite. The computer floated quickly past Reeber, following Hastings. Anxious now--certain that there were things Hastings was holding back, Reeber hurried on. Just before he reached his room, he heard his name called.

"Clement!" it was Melana, and another woman.

"I'm so glad you're here. Everything's slipping away from me!"

"I know! Clement, this is Celeste Jenson--the intentor Fed Comm brought in to help decipher the Coss artifacts.

Celeste was a handsome woman who wore a look of determination and excitement. Reeber shook hands with her as Melana continued to talk.

"I used an obscure research law to free her so she could come! Clement--Celeste knows that she should be here--as much as you or I! I know she's right about that, too. Collins had her confined under the Official Secrets Act."

"I couldn't find any legal solution to help you keep and decipher the Coss artifacts. I'd tried everything, but I couldn't get anywhere. I needed time to think, so I went jogging. I know I needed to get you the right people who could help you understand—and fast. Tonight's it!"

"And Clement, I knew who the most important person for you would be. Celeste, here. She needs to be here, do you understand? She *needs* to be here! I . . . I just didn't know what to do to make it happen. The more I thought into it, the more I was sure there was no way to do this either! Finally, I kind of gave up. I was just sure there was no way!"

"And then--I don't know where this thought came from--but it came into my mind as clearly as if someone standing next to me had said the words 'the Research Release Act.' You know, I'd heard of it, but I wasn't really familiar with it at all. Well, I got to a terminal, called it up--researched it and found that it has a clause--really oddly written. I'm surprised it ever made it into law! Anyway using this clause I was able to pull her in on this assignment!"

"I'm anxious to see these things you have!" Celeste said.

"In here." Reeber hustled the two women inside.

Hastings had the Coss stone under the scanner. The Gelding Mark Eight was speaking.

" . . . As with the Coss sphere, and below the first several layers of the usual, natural atomic arrangements of the igneous rock, I find some very deliberate and structured atomic matrixing that seems to be specifically designed to prevent study by scanning. I know, by the weight of the Coss stone, that it cannot be merely igneous rock. My supposition is that there is something imbedded inside it, the nature of which I cannot determine."

"Burning Gates!" Hastings snorted. "Is the atomic structuring encoded, as with the sphere?"

"I believe that is what I just said. And, as with the sphere, the possibility of understanding it is about as unlikely, though this structuring is much more obscure and therefor, significantly more difficult to break."

"What about the possibility of melting the rock away, layer by layer?"

"I cannot be certain, but there is an eighty-five percent chance the atomic structuring bears energy channeling properties specifically designed to dissipate heat in a way that would make the systematic removal of the rock layers impossible."

"No, in other words," Hastings all but barked at the thing. "What about a flash heating?"

"Possible, but it may well damage what lies inside."

"Master Hastings," Reeber was growing impatient and worried. "What is the tone the computer spoke of--the one that sounded when Procyx appeared? That's what the computer said, isn't it?"

Hastings seemed not to hear. Instead, he bustled over the Coss stone. "I know something's

inside!"

"Master Hastings, will you stop?" Reeber took him by the arm.

"WHAT IS IT?" his response was biting and angry.

"You mentioned something about a tone. What did it sound like?"

"What the Gates does it matter?"

Reeber straightened. "Because the Coss stone does something when a certain tone sounds."

Hastings finally seemed to pay attention to him.

"Look," Reeber said, going over, picking up the tuning fork and striking it on the edge of a table. At the tone, the Coss stone performed its floating ritual with the smooth delicacy and precision Reeber had seen so often before then returned to its resting place, exactly where Hastings had left it.

"I'll be Burned!" Hastings whispered, then began to grin. "I'll be Burned at the Gates! Why didn't you show me this first off?"

But before Reeber could answer, Hastings turned to the computer. "I've got to get my Falspar files. Burn me, why didn't I bring them? Stay here. You might as well be trying to break the atomic coding while I'm gone." He turned to Reeber, taking him by the arms, grinning like a school kid with a new toy. "We've got it! I know how to find out what's inside this thing!"

"How," Reeber asked. "What?" But Hastings was heading for the door.

"Don't anyone go anywhere--don't do anything until I get back. Burn me blind if I don't know how to make the Coss stone do *all* its tricks. I'll be right back!"

With that, he was gone.

They stared at one another, shocked, hopeful and fearful all at once.

"I don't trust that man." Melana said after a moment, then turned to Reeber. "All right, Clement. This is it. Don't you see? Look how everything has worked out. Hastings is gone, the Gelding Mark Eight is still here, as is Celeste. Clement, we can study the objects in private, but we have no time to waste!"

"But through Hastings I've learned things about the artifacts---things I couldn't have uncovered by myself."

"Perhaps. But Clement, something isn't right. Can't you feel it? Look, why wouldn't Hastings tell you anything about the tone? Why wouldn't he answer your questions? I tell you the man has an ego as big as Polyphemus. He intends to claim for himself, every discovery you've made together."

Reeber was unsure, somehow feeling that Melana was right yet hating the intrigue of it all. After a moment, he found the words to describe his hesitation. "Just because Hastings is capable of such unprofessionalism doesn't mean that *I* have to stoop to it. I will not behave that way!"

"Look, Clement--the secrets contained within these artifacts were not intended for just anyone. Coss understood that. He chose one person and one person alone to guard and study these artifacts. He meant them for *you*. Can't you see that?"

"I can see that to a point, but why? I'm not a specialist on Mhyrn. Why?"

"I'm can't say. But this much I know, Clement. There is something unique about you---inside you--something wonderful and innocent---no, that isn't the right word--guileless. That's it. Outwardly, you always act according to what you are within. And you are willing to learn! No matter how much it hurts, you are willing to learn and change by that learning. Clement, that's a wonderful trait! And Polyphemus saw that the moment you arrived. It shows you how much it values a willing heart. That's why it gave you those visions--treasures of such incredible power. And you're not even a Mestrate! Do you remember how we said that this has never happened before? It hasn't. Clement, this *is* a rare event--all of this! And you, Clement Reeber, are meant to see the secrets of the Dawn Era. *You!* Can't you see it? Can't you feel the rightness of what I'm saying?"

Even though it did seem so, Reeber felt obligated to find reasons why it *shouldn't* be. Yet deep within him he knew Melana was right. There *was* something special here. And interestingly enough, at the exact moment he accepted that fact he felt a bright, burning assurance of its correctness within him. It was the same potent assurance he had felt earlier--an assurance that all of this had a deep and specific purpose. It served an incalculable good. Even so, a lingering intellectual corner of his mind, still afraid, asked Polyphemus for a final reassurance within his mind.

Without a moment's hesitation his answer came.

It is so, the gentle, soft voice whispered within him. *You stand at the threshold. The secrets of the Dawn Era shall be shown only to those who will listen, and to you whose heart is open, even as a child's, shall there be shown wonders and powers unlike any that have been seen in this universe for many eons. Do not fear those wonders and trials that shall come to you, for through them you shall be made great even unto the preserving of your life. You shall see the redemption of worlds without end. You shall even take an active part in that redemption.*

"I must know---please!" Reeber asked, not for the first time. "Who are you?"

I am but an instrument of Him who is worthy to be served.

The flood of reassurance all but shook Reeber to the core. His eyes stung with tears and an incredible fire of determination flared up within him. He turned to Melana, whose eyes also wore a glistening mantel of understanding. They embraced, holding each other. When Reeber looked at Celeste, he saw that all were one.

"He spoke to all of us," Celeste said, her voice filled with awe. "Hurry," she said, then stepped forward, looking at the Coss stone. She picked it up, turning it over in her hands. After a moment, she shook her head. "I can't feel anything from just a stone. I need to see symbols." She went to the Coss sphere.

"These symbols are new--here and here--just very recently--perhaps just days or even hours ago. Is that possible?"

Reeber nodded, remembering the computer's stating that the symbols had changed from what they had been back home. "Yes, but I don't understand how it was done."

"Doesn't matter," Celeste further searched the orb, looking at it, speaking as she studied it. "It's a finder. I don't know what for . . . These thirteen triangles are symbols of . . ." she squinted " . . . warriors . . . no ships--no, warriors. Oh, I . . . Ships that are warriors. Yes. And this one here--this topaz jewel--it rules the others."

"What about the square at the bottom?" Reeber asked, convinced now of her ability to see from her perception that the numerical symbols had just recently changed. Her statement about twelve warriors resonated with the text headings of the Mhyrnian mythology he had studied only a while ago--texts that mentioned the twelve warriors.

Celeste turned the orb upside down, gazing at the etched square. "I can't . . ." She gazed at it for a time. Then suddenly she turned, looking at the Coss stone. "It's that thing, there--whatever's inside it. The stone--whatever is inside--has great powers. It has power to save worlds. Anyway, that's the intent of the rectangular symbol. The spiraling row of symbols on the bottom hemisphere are tied to the square, somehow. It's intended to tell you something about both the square and what the orb points to."

"And this star shaped dark, sapphire, on top--this jewel. What is intended by it?"

"Procyx. It's Procyx. The symbols trailing out from it relate in a similar way to the symbols spiraling out from the square on the bottom." She laughed, shaking her head in delighted amazement. "This orb--it points to Procyx. It always points to Procyx. And the spirals of symbols on the top and bottom hemispheres--they weren't even there before Procyx appeared. And they've

changed several, perhaps many times since they were first written. What they mean, exactly, I don't know." She gazed at them in silence for nearly a minute, then proffered a guess. "There are only two symbols in the spirals, aren't there--just a long string of just two symbols, simple--simple expressions? Yes. That has to be it. I feel that they must be numbers--perhaps measurements of distance. What the base measurement is, I can't . . . I can't feel it. And . . . wait. Wait! There's something else. The star, here on top--it does something."

Reeber came over, taking the orb and looking at the deep, blue jewel embedded at the top of the orb. "It does something? What?"

Celeste shook her head. "I don't know. Let me see it again." She took it back, almost hungrily. "Oh, this is wonderful! Oh, if you could just feel . . . it has, at its center power and joy!"

Reeber felt a touch at his arm. He turned again to look at Melana. For just a moment, all thoughts of Procyx vanished. She was here with him again. What was this incredible rapport they shared--a rapport he did not believe possible? It seemed, to the purely intellectual part of him, so deeply emotional that only some silly, adolescent ideal of impossible love came close enough to describe his and Melana's feeling for one another: infatuation. It was a condition he would have thought ridiculous, did he not feel its incredible power over him. He could not deny it, and he saw that Melana was equally stirred by it herself. He could see her struggling against its relentless effect on her. At last, she managed to avert her eyes from his, looking down. Her voice, when she spoke, was thick with emotion.

"I'm not going to fight it anymore, Clement."

He wanted to hug her. But still, it wasn't time. As quickly as he felt the urge to take her to him, he recalled that the crisis that had brought them together must be resolved first; that somehow, this rapport they shared had, at its base, a greater purpose than merely matchmaking--or lovemaking. He smiled at that thought. The Universe--Polyphemus--whatever power had deliberately brought them together to aid in the resolution of the destruction of countless worlds matched so unlikely a couple. About the slim chances of them ever falling in love otherwise, Reeber had no doubts, no illusions. Yet here it had happened--and for a purpose that must not be disturbed until it was accomplished. It was an affirmation of what he had already known, but felt now with the power of an unshakable conviction and--a warning. They *would* both enjoy their love--for the rest of their lives and perhaps beyond, if there was an afterlife. But it was not to happen yet . . . not yet.

"Soon," Reeber said, quietly. That brought her gaze to his again. He nodded, smiling. "Now what did you really intend to say to me?"

She smiled at his perception--his knowing her intents without any words spoken. He knew that that was what she had touched his arm about.

"Clement, what is the tone you were asking Hastings about? I know he didn't give you an answer, but what is it that you wanted to find out about it?" Then, as if something clicked inside her, Melana turned to look at the Coss stone with the tuning fork resting beside it. "Tone. I see. He said something to you about a tone that he never answered."

"Actually, the Gelding Mark Eight said something about a tone--440 hertz. It's the unit of measurement of the bottom spiral of symbols on the Coss sphere."

"What is 440 hertz?" Melana asked. "I mean, what note is that?"

Reeber shook his head. "I don't know for sure."

"Computer," Melana said, turning to the terminal. "What note is 440 cycles per second?"

"I do not recognize your voice," the computer said, apologetically. "I cannot divulge information of any type without Master Hastings' approval. Since he has left, I cannot give you any information."

Celeste turned to the computer. "Would you mind printing out what you just said?" she put the Coss sphere down carefully.

"I see no purpose in doing that," the computer replied.

"Do you have any programming restrictions against complying?" Melana asked.

"No."

"Then comply."

A moment later Celeste held a printed copy of the conversation the computer had just had with Melana. She nodded, handing the paper to back to her. "Hastings does not intend to grant any of us any access to material related to Procyx without his being here. He *does* intend to take full credit for all the discoveries you have made, as Melana said. He has placed protections on certain files relating to Procyx which only he, apparently, can access."

Melana smiled ruefully. "I knew it. Computer, answer my question. A query concerning the nature of a general sound surely has no bearing on anything contained in your protected files."

"This information does."

Melana thought on that answer for a moment. "By identifying this data as protected, you have divulged information about the importance of my query--that 440 hertz is important information relating to Procyx."

"This you already knew," the computer said evenly.

"I submit that you have failed to protect the applicable data in your protected files."

"Be that as it may, I can tell you nothing without Master of Doctors Hastings' permission.

"Oh, I'm tired of this!" Reeber went to his own computer and posed the same question to it.

"440 cycles per second is precisely the tone "A" above middle "C," his computer replied."

Reeber took the tuning fork. "Measure this. Tell me what the frequency is and the wave form." He struck the tuning fork. Melana and Celeste watched the Coss stone perform its floating function -- Celeste gazing at the event in unashamed awe -- while Reeber watched the waveform measurements as recorded by the computer.

"A sine wave," it spoke. "It is imperfect by 0.12 percent variation either way. The tone is 'A' -- 440 cycles per second."

"Now we're getting somewhere!"

Suddenly, the door chimed.

"He couldn't have got back that quickly!" Melana said, starting toward the door. "I'll tell whoever it is to go away."

Reeber only nodded. His hands were trembling with anticipation. "Computer," he spoke to his own terminal. "Correlate 440 hertz with any and all data contained in the Coss records."

Reeber could hear Melana speaking in the background as he waited.

" . . . But we have until the meeting tomorrow . . ." her voice sounded anxious, troubled. He tugged his attention back to the computer. Why was it taking so long?!

" . . . I . . . this just can't . . . "Melana's voice trailed off. It was hard to read her feelings in it.

"There are two correlations." The computer finally spoke.

"Cite them!" Reeber coaxed it even before it had finished speaking.

"The chants of the End Star are all sung in the key of 'A'."

" . . . And!?"

"The purpose for singing the chants in this key is that it is supposed to contain holy power. The prophecies say that whenever the End Star appears, it sings a hymn of great power. But the hymn is only momentary in duration. All conditions must be correct for the sacred works of Zorl to be accomplished."

"Clarify," Reeber said. He was having trouble understanding what the computer had just said through his excitement.

"Put another way, Procyx was prophesied to sound its hymn of power at the exact moment of its appearance, and at no other time. If the most high noblemen of Zorl were to work the powers of Zorl against the evil End Star of Grief, then all the holy parts must stand together at the moment of Procyx's appearance, or else ruin would follow. That is the prophecy."

"Holy parts?" Reeber said after a moment's reflection. "What are they?"

"I am not sure. There are cross references to the sacred relics."

"Close it up! Draw some suppositions!"

"The sacred parts could be the Coss sphere and stone and other artifacts. There are more than two sacred parts associated with the End Star."

"How many associated with the End Star of Grief?"

"Three. The sacred finder, the sacred record, and the sacred key."

Reeber thought a moment. "List possible synonyms for finder, record, and key, according to this specific context."

"Clement . . ." It was Melana, behind him.

"Just a moment. Computer?"

"Appropriate synonyms for Finder are pointer, compass, arrow."

"Clement, I really . . ."

"Please!" Reeber held up his hand. She quieted again while the computer went on.

"Record: writings, diagrams, engraven plate. Key: answer, opener, and solution."

"Correlate possibilities that the Coss stone and Coss Sphere are, in fact, two of the artifacts described in the End Star of Grief legends and lore."

There was no hesitation in the computer's action. "The Coss sphere has a better than ninety-eight percent chance of being the sacred finder. The Coss stone, obviously linked to the Coss sphere, might either be the sacred record or sacred key, encased in stone."

"And protected from tampering by organized atomic structuring and matrixing."

"Clement . . . "

"What!" Reeber spun around, angry at the interruption. He glanced at Melana's face for only an instant, finding a look of surprise and, perhaps wonder there. Standing behind her was the Lady Portia.

"Clement! She wants to help--and she has the highest security clearance of anyone on Polyphemus--even higher than Collins'"

Reeber stared in disbelief.

The Lady Portia smiled as if trying by her demeanor to show her sincerity. "Dr. Reeber--please. I am so very sorry. I have . . ." her voice broke, trembling on the edge. "I have been so wrong. When you are the voice for Polyphemus, it's easy to feel that he is . . . I mean that he has his favorites. Polyphemus is so much more generous than that. What I am trying to say is I now gladly stand at your disposal. What can I do for you?"

Reeber felt a warmth of compassion and magnanimity wash across him. This was what he had hungered for all his life--the open, uncomplicated desire to cooperate for a praiseworthy goal among the widest diversity of personalities. Few things lifted humanity more than the reconciliation of opposites. When people did it, motivated by the noblest of intents, somehow all things became possible. In that exact instant, Reeber caught a glimpse--a fractional understanding of how Polyphemus worked in its service-- a power that was magnanimous beyond understanding; loving beyond all adversity and infinite in its patience with the foibles of creatures who, more than anything

else, wanted only to be happy. Reeber pulled himself back from this warm, almost golden aura of understanding that surrounded him.

"Yes," his answer was friendly and warm. "Thank you. I really do thank you."

The Lady Portia looked relieved.

"You say you have high priority security clearances? Can you access privileged computer data? Data that is guarded by personal privilege protections?"

"I will try," The Lady Portia said.

V I

Metrasor the Mhyrnian looked up after gathering the few belongings he had decided to take with him. It seemed as if he were listening or searching the air for something no one else could see.

Morse did not discern this immediately. His senses were so bombarded by the diversity of art surrounding him that he found himself entranced by it.

In this great hall there were works of art unlike anything he had ever seen. Among them stood a scintillating, glowing column of light which, when touched, gave off the most surprising fragrances. They were never unpleasant, but always triggered strong, wonderful memories--things Morse hadn't recalled with such vividness for years.

A wide tapestry hung across a far wall--an exquisite scene of stars and worlds. When he touched one of its stars, the tapestry changed in a magnificent sweep of color, fiber, weave and texture to show scenes from the worlds touched--scenes that were breathtaking.

And over on a marble table Morse found a small sculpture of a tree bearing fruit of all different colors. One of Metrasor's sons, watching Morse regard it, invited him to pick one and eat it. Hesitantly, Morse took one of the fruit. It glowed brightly for a moment, then darkened into an earthy luster. Morse put the fruit in his mouth. It had a tart yet sweet taste and then, suddenly within his mind, there played music of such beauty and richness that, within moments, Morse had lost himself in its power. It was at the conclusion of the music that Morse saw Metrasor standing as if in a trance.

"What is it?" He asked the Mhyrnian. The little four year-old tugged at his uniform when he did not answer.

"Daddy's listening. We don't talk to daddy when he is listening."

Morse looked at the older boy, who nodded agreement, then looked back at Metrasor again. Whatever was going on, Morse decided to do what the little child had said. He waited five minutes before the Mhyrnian turned to him.

"I have everything I need except one thing. Come, boys. Up to your mother's room. Commodore, you may come as well."

They went up a circling stairway into a large room. Here, the furnishings were so obviously feminine that Morse was taken aback for a moment. Somehow, not seeing a woman about, he had not expected it. Metrasor went, without hesitation, to a tall, ornate bureau and opened its carved wooden doors. Hanging inside was a robe unlike any Morse had ever seen. Its cut was simple--even humble looking. Its fabric was marvelous. It was woven of a silver thread that looked like spun diamond, for its luster picked up every color of the rainbow, shimmering as the Mhyrnian took it carefully from its hook. Wherever the Mhyrnian touched the fabric, it glowed and danced with an inner brilliance--dazzlingly colors seemingly spawned by countless lasers within.

"The robe of my office. My Dear One completed it just before…" Metrasor's voice caught in just a hint of tightness. "…Before she went Home." He held the robe up before him and, speaking almost to himself, said, "She knew. Somehow, she knew and lived to finish it for me."

"Our mother died," the four-year old said with a kind of sober, informative voice. "She was very sick, and she died. But she will come back alive again, won't she daddy?"

"Oh, yes," Metrasor removed his outer cloak. "In the day of restoration, we shall all live again, my good son." He carefully donned the silver robe. Morse watched in growing fascination as the room filled with light. It was not like the uniforms of the Vanguards, for here the light seemed to invoke resonances along all the senses. Morse could hear music within him; a sweep of intense joy; the smell of a rich, undeniably joyful fragrance, lush in its power to set at peace; and a taste of sweetness that enthralled him.

Metrasor came forward. "These are the robes, great and terrible, that speak to each of his nature before The Creator. I will not intrude upon what the Holy One shows you at this moment, but I will say unto you that you are a good man."

Morse closed his eyes, caught up in the potent thrill of the experience. After a time indeterminate, the sensations drifted away into sensory silence. Morse opened his eyes to find the dazzling robes covered beneath the Mhyrnian's humble cloak.

"Come, sir. We must go into Polyphemus, even unto the Old World. I have a work there, and it is urgent."

V I I

The Gelding Mark Eight spoke to Reeber, Melana, Celeste and the Lady Portia. If it resented the fact it was giving information that minutes ago had been restricted, it gave no indication in its voice.

"The tone I am about to play is a digital recording of the phenomenon that occurred on board the research ship Falspar at the precise moment the Procyx phenomenon appeared. Because the Falspar was a research ship, the sample rate was twenty billion samples per second. Lady Portia, I await your order to play the tone."

She looked at Reeber. The Coss stone and sphere rested in the center of a table that had been cleared. Reeber hesitated. What would these objects do, exposed to the pure tone of Procyx? He was convinced that the imperfections of the tuning fork kept them from performing their full function while still stimulating a partial operation.

But what was the full operation? These devices had been designed to destroy Procyx, he assumed. What would they do thousands of light years away from Mhyrn--and Procyx? Were the artifacts designed to function only once and, thereafter, could not be made to work? Would that work, capable of destroying the indestructible, take everyone in the room, perhaps everyone on the planet, with it?

"Clement?" Melana gently touched his arm.

"I don't know enough to try this yet."

The door chimed.

"Go, Clement!" Melana was urgent. She clutched his arm. "This is it!"

"But what if . . ."

"Remember what Polyphemus said to us? The secrets of the Dawn Era! It's time!"

The door chimed again.

"Hurry, Clement!"

Reeber took a deep breath and nodded once at the Lady Portia.

"Play the tone," she said to the Gelding Mark Eight.

The tone was pure--crystalline and something like a bell. It was clear – radiant -- exquisite.

Before them, the Coss stone rose from the table turned on end, as it always did when the tuning fork was struck. But now a swirl of Golden sparkles appeared about it--spinning like a tiny swarm of fireflies. More and more sparkles appeared until at last the whole stone was surrounded by them in such numbers that the sparkles became a single, scintillating core of golden brilliance.

"Clement, look!"

The Coss sphere rose now from the table of its own volition, ascending above the brilliant glory that now engulfed the Coss stone. It turned slowly, the spiraling engravings on its lower surface seeming to spin outward like a frozen pinwheel, its core -- the square at its lower pole -- shining as if illuminated from within. Abruptly, there was a sun-bright flash and the golden aura that had surrounded the Coss stone disappeared. In its place floated a perfectly square plate of pure pluridium. At its center was a depression in the shape of a double-notched arrowhead. Engraved symbols radiated from it in rows like a starburst.

The notched arrowhead indentation began glowing amber, then gold. The starburst rows of symbols flashed in redundant, stepped sequences, moving from the center of the plate to the edges. After the usual period of time -- as Reeber had seen the Coss stone do repeatedly with the tuning fork -- the Coss *plate* returned effortlessly to rest on the table.

There was an urgent knocking at the door.

But the Coss sphere continued to float in the air. Reeber took one step toward it, and at his motion, it pitched its attitude so that the star-shaped jewel, now raised by at least two centimeters, pointed directly at him. The symbols that spiraled out from it shone with varying colors--pure in their intensity--coherent light.

"Push the jewel back in," Celeste said in a half whisper. "That is what you are intended to do next."

Reeber carefully reached out and pushed at the star shaped jewel. A chorus of men's voiced chanted in Mhyrnian--exquisite, and from all around them. The room darkened to pitch and the jewel began to scintillate in the coherent light of Procyx's blue glory. Stars twinkled all around Reeber, Melana, Celeste and the Lady Portia. It was as if they stood in space. The galaxy hovered behind them, seen at its very edge.

The knocking on the door had become a pounding. Reeber could hear angry shouts from without, but could not make out any words. He didn't care.

Before them hung a rose-colored sun and worlds surrounding it. In the space above the third planet there appeared twelve *warriors* standing in a circle--men and women. Each held a shining banner that glowed in a different color. It was as if these warriors were so brilliant in their power that it hurt the eye to gaze upon them. The standard of one warrior was that of a book; another's was a lion; and another's the Lyre. And there were more. The fearsome warriors drew their weapons -- dazzling, silver swords -- and lifted them upward. Procyx suddenly appeared in all its terrible majesty. The heavens were filled suddenly with burning nebulae--iridescent clouds of power arrayed in magnificent splendor. They swirled about the twelve warriors in a maelstrom of flashes and shining winds. Reeber glanced at Melana for an instant. She fought against the gales, her hair blown across her face. Reeber almost fell beneath the wind himself, but resisted.

Then, from the center of the circle of warriors, there appeared a piercing, golden brilliance. It rose from in their midst until it stood above their heads. The storms of the nebulae whirled and churned about the circle of warriors. Incredible fire-lightnings flashed from the sword tips into the very heart of the golden power. There was an incredible burst of light. It was blinding, awful in its power and staggeringly beautiful.

Procyx disappeared.

Reeber staggered beneath the joy he felt. It was the joy of liberty from Procyx. He reeled from the beauty of that freedom and, at last, at *long* last, entertained a suspicion as to why Coss had chosen him to keep the artifacts--guard them; study them.

There were twelve warriors. Twelve of them, each his or her own color and each bearing an ensign of power. This was the exact number of Vanguards that existed. And the banners of the warriors corresponded, without exception to the identities, specific mission and unique power of each of the Vanguards. The symbolism was so blatantly clear to Reeber that he trembled beneath the excitement of that discovery.

This was incredible. The salvation of the galaxy--of perhaps the whole cosmos, *did* rest on some power the twelve vanguards could focus on Procyx.

But why at Mhyrn? Mhyrn! Yes! This world they saw and its rose colored sun at the edge of the Galaxy was Mhyrn. It had to be. Reeber knew it was. But what was the great, golden radiance that had risen from Mhyrn? What was this golden light that had focused the power of The Twelve--incredible forces of nebulae and stellar storms? Powers that *must* be needed to destroy the End Star of Grief?

Then, as if in reply to his wondering, the golden shining diminished revealing a brilliant shape--an outline, difficult to resolve in the yet dazzling glare. Yet, it was unmistakable.

"A Vanguard," Melana said, half-whispering.

"A Vanguard?" Reeber echoed, not daring to hope that the most ancient myths about them might be true. *Another* Vanguard? *More* than The Twelve!?

"The Three Governors! Yes! Yes! They *must* be real--as real as the rest! The Lost Masters! This is amazing! Yes! Yes! Look! It is one of the Lost Masters! One of the secret *lost* Vanguards is on Mhyrn!"

The door burst opened behind them. The scene faded instantly and the Coss sphere went suddenly back to its place on the table.

"Stay, all of you," a security officer said sternly. Twelve other soldiers backed him, all brandishing glowing, buzzing depolarizers. "You are in violation of the Official Secrets Act."

The Lady Portia stepped forward "I have final say over these matters. I am here at the direction of Polyphemus itself. You are overstepping your bounds. Leave us at once and I will not report the matter."

"Sorry, your Ladyship, but you are also under arrest for suspicion of subversion, pending a Hexibuneral ordered investigation."

"This is outrageous . . ." Melana started forward but Reeber held her back.

"Stay," he whispered. "Listen to me! Hold your place. Wait."

She obeyed, though her race flushed with anger. Reeber didn't know how or why, but they must wait.

Stand still, Polyphemus whispered confirmation into their minds. *And wait.*

They waited.

Reeber managed to hold himself with some degree of composure until Celeste and Melana were removed, none too gently. Anger roiled inside, but he held himself still. The Lady Portia was taken next, under restraint. Then they removed the computers, both the Gelding Mark Eight and Reeber's personal unit, complete with all his personal files.

Finally they got to Reeber. One guard took the Coss Plate and the other the sphere. The latter tossed the Coss sphere casually up and down, like a ball, as they went.

"Look at this, will you?" he said. "I mean look at it! Solid pluridium. Gates, I could retire in style a thousand times over and still have enough left over to buy half a planet!"

CHAPTER SIX
Escape

I

Tulsa Brande sat back, sipping on a hot cup of Kaffi. She sighed after a bit--a sigh that lapsed into a full yawn. All about her the screens of Emoor Observatory displayed a constant and detailed monitoring of the unimaginably powerful black hole arrays and surrounding nebulae that comprised the Eye of Polyphemus.

When humanity had first discovered Polyphemus thousands of years ago, it had waited exactly as it stood now, occupying the center of the galaxy where the core stars should have been. It had been entirely complete—ancient, yet pristine and free from intelligent life existing anywhere on its inner surface--a surface now inhabited by trillions of humans.

It had been a staggering find. From the very moment of discovery, Polyphemus had been shrouded in mysteries that were as ancient as they were incomprehensible. Here was an incredible structure designed and built for deliberate and purposeful habitation. And yet when it had been found, it was entirely devoid of any and all sentient life. What was more, the animal life and floras already there were not only safe and compatible with humans, but apparently deliberately installed in order to promote human habitability.

Humans had constructed the Emoor Observatory since that discovery for the sole purpose of studying the Eye--a conglomeration of black holes that some believed served as the central energy source for the super world. The observatory, equipped with powerful, inter-dimensional megascopes capable of seeing across light years instantaneously, hovered at the edge of the Polyphemus' greatest scientific wonder: a phenomenon that had been named the membrane.

The membrane was some sort of field surrounding The Eye that filtered out every wavelength of electromagnetic energy inimical to life. It made living within Polyphemus possible, and it resided just beyond the edge of the vast accretion nebulae.

The Emoor Observatory resembled a spacecraft more than anything else. It was endowed with multiple, high-energy thruster combines that were perpetually firing at full power in order to keep the observatory in its stationary position against the terrible gravities of the Eye.

Tulsa took another sip and indulged in another yawn. She was seven hours into her shift. Having spent the previous night up late, she was tired now, to say nothing of being bored.

She glanced casually around at all the monitors. All were quiet, save for that constant stream of scanner data that passed across special windows at the bottom of each screen. Tulsa was about to take another sip when she heard it.

Leave. It was a voice so quiet that for a moment she seriously doubted that she had heard it. She listened intently, looking around her.

"Hello?"

Nothing. No one else was there. No one else *should* be there. She shrugged, starting to take another sip when it spoke again.

Leave now, the voice said. It was a soft voice--gentle but urgent, and this time she seemed able

to localize the source of the sound. She did not believe it. It seemed as if the voice had spoken within her head.

Tulsa sat up, putting her cup aside. She had heard of biotranzes--even knew some people who had them. But she did not.

Leave at once, the voice came to her a third time. Now she was nervous--confused. Not at what the voice was saying, but that she should be hearing it. It was then that the beep sounded.

She turned her head at the sound, incredulous. It was a beep from one of the monitors, a beep unheard in centuries of computer monitoring studies. Had she had time to think into it she might have marveled that the tone generator making the beep still functioned after so many generations of silence and inactivity. The beep was so unexpected a sound that, for a moment, she forgot the voice and listened with a pounding heart for a repeat as she had been told it was sure to do if, in fact, one of the monitors had beeped its warning.

Silence. A minute passed. Tulsa took a deep breath and, sitting back, reached for her cup when the monitor beeped again. No, this was another beep. Its pitch was different.

"Computer . . ." she said, sitting up and putting the cup down. "Did you just signal me?" While she spoke, she stubbed the transmission button--a command that would begin transmitting everything that had just happened in the last fifteen minutes, as well as what was going on now. It would continue to transmit to a waiting receiver down on the nearest Fed Comm platform until she countermanded it.

"Yes, I did signal you," the computer replied almost simultaneously to a third beep--different again.

"What's happening? Show specific areas of activity."

Three screens flashed red twice, then maintained a thin red border so that they would stand out from the rest. The computer then proceeded to answer her.

"Three of the black holes, Poly 123, 72 and 4, have shifted position."

Another beep; another screen flashed red and went into a red border.

"Poly 47 has also just moved.

"What's going on?" she asked, squinting intensely at each of the red-bordered screens.

Suddenly, a deep thump, a giddy feeling rippled through her then fell to calm again. The first effects from the shocked equilibrium of displaced black holes slammed violently through the observatory. An alarm sounded as the computer struggled to balance the thrusters to compensate for the new stresses of the change.

"I am adjusting. I will compensate for additional disturbances by tripling comfort shielding." The computer said calmly. "You should feel no more of them."

Tulsa struggled to regain her composure when five more beeps sounded, so close together that they made a minor chord. They heralded the shifting of five more black holes.

In the uneasy minutes that followed, the computer proved itself wrong. More jarrings came, although the stream of turbulences registered as little more than a bumpy series of vibrations.

"I've got to tell someone about this." Tulsa gave up trying to save her Kaffi and tossed the half-filled cup into the corner. "Are you recording?"

"Of course."

"Any sort of sense to it--the shifting of the black holes, I mean?"

"It seems random." This last comment almost escaped understanding as another barrage of beeps filled the room."

"Is it getting dangerous?" Tulsa asked.

"I am prepared to transfer you away, but there is no danger as yet."

"Link me up to Fed Comm."

"That may be difficult, since the gravity disturbances makes clear transmissions difficult."

"Just do it!" A moment later, the phone in front of her lit up. "Carl! Good, it's you. Listen, something's happening up here . . ."

"What? What's wrong with . . . (static) . . . can barely follow you. Please re . . . (static)…"

"Black holes are shifting all over the place!" The tones were coming in at a growing frequency now. "Gravity disruptions are getting pretty bad. I don't expect that they will affect you much, but something is definitely happening up here."

"Tulsa . . . (static) . . . All right? Don't you . . . (static) . . . out? We're prepared to . . . (static) when you . . . (static). Tulsa?"

A horrible thought struck her. Hypermotility! It slammed through her body like a shockwave of fear and pain. Not here! Not at Polyphemus. It couldn't be! It just couldn't be!

And then she remembered the voice.

"Get me out," Tulsa yelled at the computer, her pulse banging at the inside of her head. "Get me the Gates out of here!"

Suddenly the room fuzzed into green brilliance, and Tulsa found herself standing beside Carl in an average sized situation room, some light years away from the observatory.

"You all right?"

She swallowed hard, only managing to nod. "Carl, what is it? Hypermotility? It can't be!"

An alarm sounded. Carl and Tulsa turned to a megascope screen that perpetually monitored only the Emoor observatory. She stared in fascination tinged with terror at the nebulae churning visibly beyond the station. A moment later a dazzling blip flashed where the observatory had been, then nothing."

"What the Gate's going on up there?" a voice called in from another phone. Carl shook his head. "I don't know, sir. The Eye-- the Eye of Polyphemus--it's going crazy."

There was a pause. "Hypermotility?"

"Too early to tell," Tulsa answered, her mind racing to try to confirm or deny that possibility. "But it doesn't look like Hypermotility. Everything looks like it's still contained. Emoor station's gone, though."

"Got a transcript--anything before it went?"

"I sent the whole thing."

"Good. You both safe there?"

"So far."

"Well, pull out--just in case. I don't want to take any chances."

"Yes, sir," Carl said. He took Tulsa by the arm and went over to the transfer device. A moment later they both stood down on the surface of Polyphemus, thousands of light years away.

I I

Commander Melrose stood at the pinnacle of the central control helix of the Vanguard Cygnus. Powers and energies flowed over and through him making his uniform glow brilliantly beneath that incredible flux. It extended the edges of his perception and senses to correspond to the edges of the Vanguard. He could see across several dimensions, all at once.

But Procyx held his attention completely. It blazed in its terrible beauty, directly ahead of the Vanguard. Other stars also shone about the great vessel. But these were not the stars one would expect, for all seemed to be *copies* of Procyx, though the color of their coherent light varied across the

entire visible spectrum. These were the new alien stars, Melrose thought with a twinge of fear. These were the children of Procyx.

The other Vanguards pulled away from the rendezvous point, three to port, three to starboard, three below and two lifting upward all heading toward attack positions all around Procyx. Following suit, Melrose carefully guided the Cygnus into its place as indicted on a three-dimensional diagram floating before him. Once the Cygnus had arrived he relaxed, letting the Vanguard itself maintain its place.

"This is Commodore Davis, commanding the Elijah. One minute to engage negative graviton amplification," a voice tranzed in his head. "Is everyone ready?"

"This is Melrose, Commodore. We stand ready, sir, but I have not heard. Were there any significant results on the negative graviton tests you ran?" Melrose tranzed.

The answer, hesitant, came back. "Well yes, Commander. There were some unexpected developments. I have heard no negative comment on them from the science executive team here with us, so I am proceeding."

"So, we *are* go for this, then?" he asked.

There was a pause.

"Sir?"

"Commander Melrose, this is Dr. Greenwood--research assistant. If it's all right, Commodore Davis, I'll attempt to answer. We ran some tests firings of amplified negative gravitons. Everything seemed to behave as predicted except that, on the larger scale tests, we encountered some unexpected anomalies . . ."

"Anomalies? Commodore Davis, shouldn't we hold the count down?"

"Hold the countdown," Davis tranzed. "Point of order noted."

"Doctor Greenwood," Melrose continued. "Did you say there were anomalies? Can you be more specific?"

"Yes. On larger scale tests we encountered an unexpected graviton back flux."

"What's that?"

"A graviton kickback apparently from the test matter receiving the negative 'g' bombardment."

"A graviton kickback. That wasn't predicted?"

"Well, not exactly--No."

"That sounds troubling to me. What do you believe the result of such a kickback will be on the full-scale assault?"

"Hard to say, Commander."

"I understand," Melrose, a mere second officer, geared himself up for this. "Ladies and Gentlemen, I submit that before proceeding we need to run more tests, or at least wait until computer modeling can be adjusted incorporating this new data to see what we get."

"Just a Burning minute," A stern voice suddenly interrupted the dialogue. "Davis what's going on, here? Who is this Melrose person? Who's talking?"

"Commander Melrose on the Cygnus," Melrose replied.

"*Commander*? Isn't Commodore Morse in command?"

Melrose swallowed once. "No, sir. He's on assignment by Polyphemus. Who is this?"

"I am Master of Doctors Gilredd. I command this Procyx neutralization mission. Davis, Who ordered these tests?"

"I did," Davis replied calmly. "We had nearly a day's wait until all the Vanguards arrived. I had been ordered directly by Polyphemus to conduct tests on one of the smaller Procyxian neo-stars. I

sent you a memo on the matter. Didn't you receive it?"

There was a pause. From the tone of his voice, Melrose suspected that Gilredd probably never read any memo from anyone he considered an inferior and that he desperately wanted to scold the Elijah's commander for taking such presumptuous initiative without first consulting him. But then Davis *had* informed him, and Gilredd *had* ignored the notice. The Master of Doctors had no one to blame but himself. It seemed that a fear of criticizing what Polyphemus might have ordered was what restrained him from further taking Davis to task on the matter.

Melrose quietly pressed forward with his objection. "Sir, don't you feel it would be prudent to run more tests before going ahead?"

"To do it right, we would have to return to Polyphemus, enter the new data, run the model again--evaluate it--Grief, gentlemen! That would mean a delay of several days--possibly weeks--at least. We cannot afford that luxury! The need to take aggressive action *now* is imperative. The Gelding Mark Eight has predicted a broader phase of destructive activity caused by Procyx. It will be far deadlier than even the worst scenarios I could imagine from any sort of minor graviton kickback. Mister Melrose, we dare not delay taking action. Clearly, a certain amount of positive graviton leakage back into space is insignificant."

"But there's so much we don't understand yet--don't you think? I mean, with all these anomalies . . ."

"This is only one anomaly, Commander. I cannot imagine it having any significance. Must I remind you that this problem has been thoroughly researched by the best minds in the galaxy?"

"I do not doubt that," Melrose tranzed quietly. "We have a lot at stake here, and I . . ."

"I don't need some upstart second officer telling me what's at stake here, mister!" He said *second officer* as though it were a swear word.

Melrose kept quiet.

"I want a formal apology, right now, Commander," Gilredd said.

"I apologize for any discourtesy," Melrose tranzed after only a moment. "I do *not* apologize for the content of my objection expressing professional reservations against our proceeding at this time. As commander of the Cygnus—even *acting* commander--I am within my rights to voice any reservations I have on *any* procedure. I hereby make formal objection and request caution in proceeding without further tests and evaluations."

No one spoke for a moment.

"This is Commodore Fong, commanding the Vega," a new voice tranzed. "Gentlemen, I believe we are all under significant stress. Let's none of us make any hasty decisions or statements. Commander Melrose has a valid point, Master of Doctors Gilredd. In view of the fact that *Polyphemus* ordered these tests I believe we must consider the results carefully and weigh them with conservatism. I second his request for caution."

"This is a lot of beauracratic hog-spit!"

"You must respond officially," Fong replied after a hesitation. "May I suggest care?"

"You people know nothing of Procyx! We have been studying it for centuries! You're out of your league, here!"

"Is that your formal reply to Commander Melrose's formal objection?"

"Of course it is, you idiot!"

A shocked pause ensued, then Fong, calmly and evenly, put the question to him. "For the record--it is your official opinion that the unexpected findings of these field tests are of insignificant importance to delay the neutralizing procedure as outlined by the Gelding Mark Eight?"

"There is no credible reason to delay," the answer was swift, yet halting. Melrose shook his

head, looking away briefly. How could Gilredd possibly know the effects if he had just now learned of them? Openly, Melrose tranzed "I will proceed as ordered." Then, to the crew alone, he added "Let's hope this thing works."

"Resume countdown," Gilredd's tranz sounded anxious.

"Resume countdown," Melrose echoed to his crew. Below him, Melrose saw the glow of uniform after uniform blazing up into full brilliance as the Vanguard prepared to gather Procyx's light and alter it into negatively charged gravitons then pump them back into the End Star.

"Thirty seconds."

Melrose projected a super-electromagnetic collector far out beyond the Cygnus. After a few seconds, he saw the hull of the Vanguard begin to glow a deep, rich violet--almost ultraviolet. Melrose looked around him and could see the cascading sparkles of photons striking the collector and falling inward toward the ship. The pluridium buzzed and resonated as it altered those photons into negatively charged gravitons and began bouncing them back and forth along its hull, like a kind of gravity laser--faster and faster; stronger and stronger. The hull of the Vanguard sang --a deep rumbling chorus of incredible forces channeled as only pluridium could channel them.

"Five . . . four . . . three . . . two . . . one . . . begin."

The discharge of gravitons at Procyx shook not only the Vanguard but also the very fabric of space. Churning, inter-dimensional warping gathered about the Cygnus like a twisting tornado. The graviton amplification and channeling surged to a great roar. Melrose looked ahead at Procyx.

The terrible End Star began to shift color just as the model had predicted. It was no longer its rich, pure blue but now shone green, then yellow green and then yellow.

"Go!" someone tranzed absently. "Go! Go! Go!"

The call was picked up audibly. The Vanguard literally screamed. Hope flickered in Melrose's heart. "Go," he added. "Please, dear God," he whispered with complete and unblemished intent--like a child's prayer. "Save us all from this horror!"

Suddenly, Procyx vanished.

A deafening cheer erupted from the crew. It went on and on until Melrose, looking around him, found that something was not right. It was the stars: the bizarre stars of Procyx blazed in dazzling, even blinding brilliances. There were now ten times as many of them than there had been before and even as he watched they multiplied, increasing to a hundred times more. Melrose spun around to look behind him. Procyx shone with incredible, insane horror. Delicate tendril-looking webs of blue scintillated about it. Flashings of blue energy flickering many times a second all over the convoluting webbing like thousands of tiny explosions that went on and on.

Suddenly, the ship plunged into white drive.

"What happened?" Melrose asked the Cygnus. The soft woman's voice answered him with some degree of distress--a condition Melrose had never encountered from her.

We are in emergency thrust. My future monitoring systems have successfully altered the time flow, thus preserving the ship. A feedback flux of positive gravitons destroyed the Vanguard one and a half seconds after we escaped.

Melrose all but staggered under this announcement. *Destroyed the Vanguard?* The concept of future monitoring made possible by the inter-dimensional depths of pluridium escaped his understanding. It wasn't that he could not conceive of such a thing, it was just that he had never actually experienced the effects of that system first hand nor ever appreciated its incredible importance. The reality of it defied comprehension by any human.

"Where are we going?" he asked the Cygnus.

Home. Polyphemus has called us.

"The other Vanguards?"

Like us, they have all escaped.

"And Procyx?"

It is, I fear, a thousand times more powerful now than it was before our attempt to destroy it.

Behind the fleeing Vanguards, Procyx blazed more brilliantly in its terrible, blue glowering. Horribly, throughout the galaxy now, Hypermotility began striking at new suns and their worlds once every five seconds.

III

> " . . . Without actual field-tests at the site, we believe it premature to take any action against Procyx at this time. We know that the Gelding Mark Eight predicts there will soon be a significant increase in the level of destruction caused by Procyx and that only prompt action may avert it. Even so, we recommend caution, lest any unexpected reactions cause even greater damage than that predicted by any natural rise in Procyxian activity yet some days or weeks away.

Collins shook his head, slowly. The letter had been sitting on his desk for more than a week. Only his secretary's prodding had driven him to pick it up. He read on.

> "Do not misunderstand us. We believe that the conclusions of the Gelding Mark Eight are correct, but without actual field tests we cannot be sure. We have expressed these concerns to Master of Doctors Hastings several times but were told that we were out of line on each occasion. Sir, we appeal to you for wisdom and strongly recommend restraint until actual experiments can be made.
>
> "We realize that in going over Master of Doctors Hastings' head in this matter we may be risking our careers. Nevertheless, we stress that basing a course of action solely on a computer model without strenuous efforts at verification through actual field testing is dangerous and could have serious consequences . . ."

Collins skipped to the end. There were nearly fifty signatures here, including several Masters of Doctors. But most were either merely Doctors or just Masters of Science. He shook his head. Fifty out of fifteen hundred was insignificant. What was it with these people? Did they actually think *they* could see something Hastings could not? Hastings, who had more degrees than nearly all of them combined? Such insubordination should not go unnoticed. He nearly turned around to give the letter to Hastings but thought better of it. Better wait and see what happened.

If the Procyx neutralization mission failed, Collins might well be able to make use of this letter--promote the hesitations of the researchers whose signatures were here *as true and pure scientific insight*, and come off the better for publicizing it--responding to the spirit of the letter. He could announce that these concerns had not reached him in time to stop the dangerous procedure, but that he would now shift command of Procyx research under the direction of such excellent scientists as these. The tragic error could be shown on the part of Hastings and his group. Their scientific method could be shown to sloppy by rushing foolishly ahead without actual field tests. Collins smiled.

Best of all, he wouldn't have to give Reeber the time of day. Right here, even in Hastings' midst, were the objections the hick interloper had made! *Here* among trained scientists in their fields was the insight Reeber had seen. He could send fat-boy packing.

On the other hand, if the Procyx neutralization worked, Hastings ought to know that a bunch of upstarts had tried to go over his head. He would best know how to deal with them.

Collins turned to the matter at hand. Before him rested the Coss artifacts. He had Merrimoor waiting in a side room, ready to bring him in to receive the artifacts officially. He had worked with Merrimoor on the acceptance speech. The Mhyrnian had proven a little more difficult to work with than he had first surmised, and it had cost him. Still, reduction of the import fees he had agreed to on Mhyrnian pluridium would be well worth the recognition Collins would receive at deciphering the function of the Coss artifacts. It would assure not only his permanency as Executor of the Hexibuneral, but would also firmly establish Academia as the greatest of all disciplines and did, therefore, *always* deserve to govern the others.

The fact that he could not use the press release he had so carefully crafted still smarted. He had paid well for such specialized public relations out of his own resources, and the best never went for cheap. Now he must move ahead unrehearsed, under normal, un-enhanced conditions -- un-enhanced meaning no possibility of including subliminal emotional enhancements for which he had paid so dearly to underline his planned announcement. Gates of Hell!

But then he remembered that enhancements had had absolutely no effect on the Lady Portia when he had shown *her* the release, unless it had worked to depress her. Sometimes that happened, particularly with individuals already in a state of emotional upheaval to begin with. Well, perhaps it *was* better this way. Emotional enhancement was illegal, so it was dangerous to use--especially for a Hexibuneralist. Only Collins' diplomatic immunity as Executor of the Hexibuneral protected him from scrutiny. He had carefully crafted and shepherded the legislation protecting him by providing a loophole. He had even come off looking like a hero by sponsoring legislation appearing to make sure that such methods could not be used on the public. No, this was better. Better save the enhancing for more dangerous situations--dangerous to him.

Still, Collins smiled. Reeber had done him a favor. He had demonstrated that there were no inherent dangers in exposing the artifacts directly to the pure tone of Procyx's appearance. It had also revealed the artifact plate, which Hastings had assured him could not have been revealed any other way. He decided that it would look best if he credited Reeber for bringing the artifacts to Polyphemus. That would surely make Reeber less likely to even try any interference.

He turned the Coss plate over and over in his hand. It would look much more impressive on camera than the rather boring stone that had previously concealed it. The Reeber breakthrough incident had also, quite nicely, established a very good case in proving the treachery charges he would soon officially file against the Lady Portia. A breech of security at the highest level! He smiled. Couple that charge with the fact that she had then shared the information gained with common people, and he was sure he had her.

It was a pity. Having as a colleague one in her position had proven incredibly useful in the past. But then, most likely, he could carefully screen anyone Polyphemus might choose to replace her. He would reject individuals who subscribed to outmoded attitudes and nagging ethics in favor of those who understood the true place of absolute supremacy Academia deserved among all the disciplines of human endeavor and would do what was needed to insure that supremacy.

A motion aside took his attention. Reeber, his escort -- Collins could not remember her name -- the Mestrate intentor and the Lady Portia were now brought into chairs at the back of the room under field restraint. Any of them could be seen and touched without problem. They could walk freely and move about. But if they tried to escape or speak out of turn, Collins could instantaneously tranz them unconscious. He had instructed his security men to inform them of this and demonstrate how the field worked. He could tell by their expressions that they both understood the reality of the field's

power and suffered beneath a sense of complete frustration at being able to do nothing against it. Another pity. If they had not been so greedy for the praise and recognition of discovery--a discovery Reeber might have made on his own, years ago, had he been smart enough to see what he had--they could be openly sharing in the event now. But it could not be helped. No guards stood around them. None were needed. Collins' biotranz control of their fields made the need for shepherding guards ridiculously over-dramatic.

The room filled with reporters. Collins waited for the report on the negative graviton attack on Procyx. He had specifically stipulated that it be security scrambled and biotranzed to him and him alone. He wanted no surprise questions.

I V

Reeber felt utterly helpless. He had been the one on which they had chosen to demonstrate the field restraint. They had said there we be no pain, only unconsciousness if they acted out of hand. But there had been pain--a searing pain that had flashed white hot a moment before the darkness had closed over him, and awakening, he had staggered beneath a roaring headache. Even now it throbbed at the back of his skull.

Beside him, Melana was ashen. Apparently, this was the first time she had ever run up against an opposition that could threaten her future and person in a way that could ruin the rest of her life. She acted brave, but inside he knew she was terrified. So was he. The Lady Portia, so recently become an ally, was the only one of them who stood with absolute defiance tinged with a sense of expectant anticipation. They had shared a moment before standing beneath the field restraint machine.

"Polyphemus will not allow this!" The Lady Portia had said, her voice filled not only with outrage, but with some kind of assurance, as if she knew something but couldn't say anything.

Reeber leaned forward, resting his elbows on his thighs, rubbing his forehead with his hands. The oppression he felt was more lingered near fatalism. And why not? He had failed miserably.

Clement, Polyphemus spoke as a whisper inside his head. *Turn around and see your rescuer.* The voice was so quiet--so utterly unexpected that Reeber jerked upright. For a moment, he listened again, but the voice did not repeat itself. Carefully, unobtrusively, Reeber turned to look behind him. His eyes fell naturally on two figures, one of whom he recognized. Standing at the back of the hall were Commodore Morse and a tall figure wearing a dark, hooded robe. Morse saw Reeber instantly and regarded him with an expression markedly neutral--significantly neutral. Reeber turned to tell Melana.

Say nothing, Polyphemus interrupted him. *Do nothing. Just wait.*

Reeber suppressed a flood of excitement. He had to force himself to remain not only calm, but appear to be as gloomy as he had before. He did notice, however, that the Lady Portia was looking back at Morse and the mysterious figure as well. As she turned back her gaze met Reeber's for a moment. A hint of a smile flickered across her lips. She knew.

Reeber looked up at the dais again. Collins looked as though he were listening to something.

The biotranz, Polyphemus whispered inside Reeber's head. *The attempt to neutralize Procyx using negative gravitons has failed. He is just now learning this.*

Collins' face went white. He turned to Hastings abruptly, then stood and urged Hastings from the room--a motion that did not go unnoticed by the reporters. A flurry of muttering began, mingled with a few shouted questions as they left the room.

"What is it?" Melana said, her face frightened. Before he could answer he saw her expression soften. When she looked at Reeber, her eyes were swollen with tears. He nodded subtly, putting his

arm about her shoulder and pulling him to her. They clung together in anxious, incredulous, thankful silence while all around them there was turmoil. Turning to Celeste, he found her face serene. She must have known, too

A moment later, Collins returned to the room. The shouted questions flew with such flurry that none of them were intelligible. Collins raised his hand for quiet and got it. Reeber watched him take a deep breath.

"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming. I know you are interested in the exchange I just had with Master of Doctors Hastings--head of the Procyx Research project. He has just been called away on important matters relating to the purpose of this press conference. Now, down to business."

From a side room, a tall Mhyrnian entered. His beard and hair were braided-six in front and seven in back. Reeber recognized the rank as one of the seven Guardians--chieftains of the ruling class of Mhyrn.

"I have invited Ambassador Merrimoor of Mhyrn to join us..."

"He's not going to tell them," Reeber whispered. "He isn't going to tell them about Hastings' failure."

Collins turned around and picked up the Coss artifacts. "Ladies and gentlemen, due to the generous efforts of a Doctor Clement Reeber of the Synclore Sector, and his associates . . ."

Reeber felt a flood of embarrassment, mingled with disgust. Collins was trying to cover all the angles. He felt a sudden urge to shout him down but suppressed it. Reeber was to do nothing, for the moment. He tried to go on listening without reacting. Collins went on.

" . . . These ancient and rare artifacts from the planet Mhyrn have just now come into our possession. As you can see, they are made of pluridium. Our studies have conclusively linked them to the Procyx phenomenon. These are working artifacts, dating back billions of years, and we have good reason to believe that they may hold the answer to the Procyx problem."

There was stunned silence.

"In compliance with Federation resolution RLZZNT-20-42, and as Executor of the Supreme Hexibuneral, I am pleased to return these objects to his Guardianship Merrimoor, First Chieftain of the People and Mhyrnian and Ambassador to the Federation. It is our hope that they may perform what appears to be intended function in ending the awful destructions wrought by Hypermotility." He handed the artifacts over to the Mhyrnian, who took them, gratefully. Collins stepped back from the podium, letting Merrimoor take his place.

"Thank you, Master of Doctors Collins. In behalf of the people of Mhyrn, and as Ruling High Chieftain of the People, I accept these sacred artifacts, sharing your hope that they shall indeed serve their ancient and holy function."

"Unfortunately, in the countless millennia that have intervened since their marvelous and incredible design, much history including the rise and fall of civilizations have clouded our understanding of them. Therefore, in the interest of discovering their specific purpose and function, I request the help of the Federation in utilizing its vast scientific and investigative resources to study and reveal how they were intended to end the terrible effects of Hypermotility. In this way, our peoples may work together toward ending the days of misunderstanding and strife that has too long estranged us.

"To that end, I officially turn these objects back over to your excellent researchers . . ."

But no one was listening. Reeber saw reporter after reporter listening to their comms, their faces stark. Suddenly, the lights flickered. Several of the reporters jumped to their feet, shouting questions. Reeber couldn't understand any of them--only picking up words like Eye . . . shifted . . . arrays . . .

Before Collins had any opportunity to respond, the room plunged into darkness. A moment later, red lights came on. Reeber saw a moment of terror cross Collins face, and one of the reporters managed to shout the others down.

"Master Collins--do you have any information about the shift of black hole arrays that comprise the Eye of Polyphemus?"

"Has the shift caused a power disruption?" Another shouted, before Collins could respond. "Is that why we are on emergency?"

"Is it Hypermotility?" Still another questioner screamed.

"Can you confirm a secret mission to Procyx?"

Collins raised his hand for quiet. "Gentlemen...Ladies...I..."

A frightening shudder shook the room. The reporters shouted questions in pandemonium. Collins was trying to shout them down.

"Please! This is all new to me! I can have nothing to say until I have been briefed. I will then hold . . ."

Another shudder. The lights came on again.

"This conference is dismissed!" Collins shouted, but the reporters persisted in earnest. Collins ignored them, surrounded now by aids that spoke in curt, unintelligible, agitated phrases. Guards came forward motioning Reeber, Melana, Celeste and the Lady Portia to their feet. Collins absently reached for the Coss artifacts when a deep, resonant voice spoke from the rear of the hall.

"Master of Doctors Collins," the dark hooded figure spoke across the pandemonium with surprising power. His voice was deep and his words colored by a Mhyrnian accent. "By what right do you hand these sacred objects to him who is not chosen to receive them?"

The reporters grew suddenly attentive. Collins glanced at the tall Mhyrnian with annoyance. When he saw Morse, his face went pale. He turned quickly, clutching the Coss artifacts to him. Reeber saw all of this as he and the others were being led out.

"Stop, you," the Mhyrnian spoke to Reeber's guards. "Do not remove them."

Collins held his hand up. He nodded, and the stepped back.

"Sir," Collins spoke to the Mhyrnian. "Surely you can see that we are in the midst of a crisis, here. I would ask you to speak to Ambassador Merrimoor . . ."

The figure spoke something in Mhyrnese to the Ambassador. Reeber watched, fascinated. It was as though the Ambassador had just been hit in the chest. He all but staggered, then recovered.

"But I am *First* Chieftain," Merrimoor said so all could hear. "*I* am the highest ranking Mhyrnian official. All this is legal."

The tall, hooded figure spoke again. "Reexamine the law. It states that the highest *holy* leader is to have custody of the sacred artifacts."

Cameras were live. Reeber could feel it.

"There are no more of the Most High Noblemen to the God Zorl. There have not been for decades now. I tell you, in their absence, *I* am the ranking official.

Collins watched, appalled. Reeber noticed some of Collins' security guards casually beginning to position themselves around Morse and the Mhyrnian.

"Perhaps. There are certainly none the Most High Noblemen to Zorl here at this time. But that is of little consequence for, you see, I am a most High Nobleman to the Great God--Him to whom Zorl is but a servant."

Merrimoor hesitated. Reeber saw what could have been fear and confusion on the Ambassador's face.

"As a Most High Nobleman, *I* am therefore the heir to these objects. Is that not so?"

Reeber saw Collins whispering something to Merrimoor. Suddenly the Mhyrnian Ambassador smiled.

"Any Mhyrnian can step forward, claiming to be a Most High Nobleman."

"Well said," the dark figure took a few steps forward. "I assume you know, then, that a Most High Nobleman to the Great God always covers himself."

Merrimoor nodded.

"Why is that?"

"Tradition says that to gaze upon a Most High Nobleman to the Great God is both great and terrible, for God reveals the true nature of the man who gazes thereon unto himself." Merrimoor laughed uneasily. "But there have been none such for centuries--none who even claimed such office." Now he grew bold. "And I believe it may be there never *were* such men."

"As did the Martyring son Krylor before you."

Merrimoor flushed.

The hooded figure exposed his face revealing an old, old Mhyrnian, his white beard braided and wrapped about his neck like a scarf. Suddenly, he did not seem so mysterious and powerful. He looked more like a kook. Reeber turned to look at Morse. The commander of the Cygnus was looking directly at him, now--pointedly.

"I am Metrasor. As a Most High Nobleman to the Great God, I formally claim all rights to these sacred objects." He looked squarely at Collins. "They have been taken from the courier," now he looked at Reeber, "who is to have delivered them into the hands of the Holy Man and the Infidel, and every moment's delay means the further loss of many lives. It is time to stop the destruction. Give me the artifacts."

"I . . ."

"You do not know what to do with them. I know their end. Give them to me. It is my right to claim them."

"Gentlemen," Collins had managed to put his head back on. "Let us discuss this in private. Surely, we can come to an agreement of some sort . . ."

"Again I say that any old fool could come in here wearing a dark robe and claim the high authorities of the Holy Ones," Merrimoor stepped forward. "Prove to us that you are a Most High Nobleman."

Metrasor hesitated. "I do not satisfy curiosity in that way. You should know that well. The High Authorities are sacred . . ."

"I don't believe it!" Merrimoor strode over, grabbing at the cloak. "Show me my true self, old fool!" His voice was more snarl than voice. He all but tore at the clothing, flinging it open in blatant defiance.

The room exploded with brilliance. Reeber felt a sudden return of that now familiar Vanguard-based joy as he gazed at the source of the light--the old, crackpot Mhyrnian.

Reeber's mind filled with colors and images. Amid them flowed a reprisal of the visions he had seen upon entering Polyphemus. Storms of fragrance and waves of taste enveloped exquisite beyond experience. And ultimately, underlying it all, encouragement blossomed into approbation.

In stark contrast, Merrimoor cried out in a kind of stifled, gurgling moan. The Mhyrnian chieftain reeled and fell to the floor. Other men and women were staggering and collapsing, their deeply emoted features cast starkly in a light as bright as the sun. Some wore expressions of disgust; others anger--perhaps hatred. Some contorted beneath a kind of lusting, disbelief. But few--a small few gazed at this magnificent glory with eyes filled with wonder and astonishment.

Reeber absorbed all this in within seconds, seeing it all peripherally and with only a part of his

mind, for his own experience enraptured him so completely. But he found that with great effort he could turn aside and look directly at others. The moment he pulled his gaze from the light, he sensed a significant return of free will. His gaze was drawn to the Hexibuneralist.

Collins' face was utterly horrified. The guards and aids around him were equally disfigured. Quickly, eagerly, Reeber turned to look at Melana.

Her face was serene. Celeste's face was peaceful and the Lady Portia was one of those who wore the face of delight, struggling against tears. She shook her head, as if in disbelief, or perhaps incredulity.

One thing was indisputably obvious. Everyone in the room but Morse and Reeber was completely mesmerized--drawn to stare unwaveringly at the mysterious Mhyrnian. Metrasor sang a single note--a note deeply familiar to Reeber, and in the midst of his paralyzing own joy, Reeber saw the Coss artifacts rise in the air, float across the room and land gently in the Mhyrnian's hands.

Reeber turned back, trying not to look at the light, but his gaze lingered too long and he found himself again beset by the flood of wonder and amazement. It was as strong now as when the light had first been revealed of the old Mhyrnian.

Morse came toward him from directly ahead. But that seemed unimportant. Reeber didn't care. The instant Morse stepped between him and the shining Mhyrnian Reeber again returned to himself.

"Hurry, Clement," he whispered. "Avert your eyes. Move quickly to stand behind Metrasor."

Reeber obeyed. He found that as he moved around people--even when he bumped into them, they took no notice of him. He went as he was instructed and stood directly behind the old Mhyrnian, waiting in his shadow. He watched first Melana, then Celeste and finally the Lady Portia interrupted from their own, personal trances by Commodore Morse. Each was sent to join Reeber, standing behind the dazzling brilliance of Metrasor's robe. When at last they were all together the old Mhyrnian lifted up his voice as if calling to someone. The words he spoke were not Mhyrnese. They were like nothing Reeber had ever heard, and yet they seemed familiar. But the moment he tried to fathom them--even when he thought on them, that feeling evaporated.

A verdant light consumed them all, and a moment later Reeber, Metrasor, Morse and the others found themselves within a vast, dark chamber. As he looked about, Reeber imagined this room somewhere deep within the great, emerald temple he had first entered upon arriving at the Old World. He did not know how he knew this or even why it was important that he know. But he knew it to be true.

Metrasor closed the dark cloak about his robe and the last vestiges of its enthralling brilliance fell away into a dark, emerald twilight. Thousands of yellow and green points of light spattered the vaulting ceiling overhead like stars in an emerald sky. The chamber seemed large enough to hold even a Vanguard within it.

Vanguard! That was it! It felt like the Vanguards here. Without even thinking, Reeber removed his shoes. It was an impulsive act--one that came so naturally to him that he paid it little heed; gave it only passing notice. The others did the same, including Metrasor, who took just a moment to kneel, bowing his head in silence. Then after a time he stood again, holding the artifacts over his head, one in each hand.

He sang a chanting chorus that echoed far and deep. His voice rang with potency beyond anything Reeber had heard in it before, as if the old Mhyrnian were, for that singular instance, young and vibrant and utterly powerful again.

An amorphous, emerald glow began coalescing from a swarm of glistening sparks at the very center of the room. Like some radiant, filamentary smoke, the glow churned and spiraled in

upon itself. It was every bit as mesmerizing in its glory as light from Metrasor's robe and created in Reeber much the same effect.

"Look," Celeste whispered. The precessing spiral of light evolved in form akin to that of a Vanguard, but much smaller.

"It's a starship," Melana whispered.

The vessel solidified at her words. But Metrasor's soft words corrected her. "This is the Nebo, a Bellatrix-class star shuttle. It is a most ancient and sacred vessel of the Primoids. For unknowable millennia it has waited here, encoded in the monument above us—a monument to the skies that hung above the first world, gone now to a sea of glass and fire. I have awakened the shuttle that it might take you and the sacred objects to Mhyrn where they are now needed most desperately."

"Here, brother," Metrasor turned to Reeber, handing the artifacts to him. "There is not much time, but I say what I must. As courier, the honor of giving them to the Holy Man and the Infidel is yours."

Reeber shook his head, not understanding any of what Metrasor was talking about and then, remembering the sacred chant to the End Star of Grief, Reeber nodded once. Metrasor smiled.

"You begin to see, now, why you have been chosen to do this."

Reeber did *not* understand that, but he felt the rightness of Metrasor's words, and that was sufficient for him.

The Mhyrnian removed his dark, outer cloak. The robe beneath no longer shined, yet glistened as with some inner luster. Metrasor carefully removed this robe as well and then, still holding it with reverence, moved around behind Reeber. Shortly, Reeber felt the light pressure of it placed upon his shoulders.

"The day will come when the Creator shall show forth His power through you. It shall come in the days that follow the destruction of the End Star of Grief. He shall prepare you in His ways and in His times.

"I would say something to you all. Do not be dismayed by the sufferings you may be called upon to endure in the days ahead. All are part of a grand design. You have earned the right to do this task because of the many things you have already suffered across the years."

Metrasor moved into the center of the small group.

"All suffering for good has buried deep within it a great power. There are some things that *cannot* be accomplished under any other influence than by that power which underlies such suffering for right.

"I do not speak of the suffering that results from unwise choices or, worse--from the self-inflicted disfiguring of oneself practiced by some primitives in a vain attempt to unlock this true power.

"I speak of difficult and unwanted struggles that accompany the battle waged in pursuit of righteousness. The suffering from that quest is among the worst to endure, for it seems as if you are all alone--and the more good you try to accomplish the greater the suffering seems to be. Is this not so?"

Reeber did not even know that he nodded yes.

"I tell all of you this secret that you may recognize why such sufferings come to you. I say again, they come because of your desires to do good and not as some sort of incomprehensible punishment.

"So, do not try too quickly to escape that suffering either by immersing yourself in forbidden things, or by trying to end your pain in desertion from the quest before it is accomplished. Endure it well, and it will pass--and you will come off victorious. This is a Law older than this universe, though little understood. Do *you* understand it?"

"I don't know," Reeber said.

"You must, if you are to fulfill your end."

"I will try," Reeber said. The rightness of Metrasor's words cut deeply, stirring within him a blending of fear, anticipation, and gratitude. Intellectually, he thought he understood the Mhyrnian's words, but emotionally he struggled.

"You will be taught," Metrasor said, free from any hint of superiority either in voice or demeanor. Then he smiled, "As *I* will be taught--even yet."

The Nebo waited, firmly constructed now. A ramp-way opened to them. Metrasor turned to Morse. "Now, sir--I beg of you. Please see to it that my sons, Oreb and Kishkor, reach Mhyrn safely. We yet have family there."

"You are not coming?" Melana asked.

"No. It has been commanded me of the Creator," Metrasor's voice trembled. "I have work yet to do that can only be done by remaining behind."

"But you said you were ready to go to Mhyrn," Morse said.

"I did. And I was. But I know now that I am not needed for that any longer. I have rescued all of you, as Polyphemus called me to do. It was in the plan. Had the rescue failed, I would have gone on to Mhyrn with the artifacts. You see, both Polyphemus and I have foreseen this day. Across many centuries, we have seen this day. It has come at last.

"No, this man here is the courier of the Holy Artifacts," he turned toward Reeber, looking very, very old again. "Now that he has them again and you have the Nebo, I am no longer needed here. I will be needed for one more task to perform here, at Polyphemus."

"Metrasor . . ." Morse shifted uneasily.

The Mhyrnian took a deep breath. "I must stay," his voice broke. "I have been commanded to stay behind.

Melana stepped up beside Reeber, fitting wonderfully against him.

"Sir," Morse said after a moment's hesitation. "I do not wish..."

"Speak your mind," Metrasor said quietly.

"Sir--we are safe, now! And they are your sons," Morse spoke with a tone of near pleading. "How can you leave them . . . send them away? Your little Oreb is only five."

" . . . And, along with his brother, all that remains of my beloved!" The Mhyrnian grew pale. His voice caught on the words he spoke. "I say again that I yet have a work to do here. Should I leave, the results could ruin everything. I cannot risk that--can't you see? The Creator has His reasons for doing things the way He does. We cannot understand them. That does not mean that we should turn away, simply because we don't see why He requires the difficult things--the hard doctrines."

Metrasor pleaded with them. "He has given me so much! I have two sons! I, who was barren! In my old age, He has given me sons! How can I not do what He asks of me?" He shook his head slowly. "To turn from Him now would be ruinous--and not just for myself. Can you see?" He looked at Reeber now. "There is nothing he may not ask of me."

Metrasor lifted his head toward the vaulting stars and spoke again in that ancient language that sounded so familiar and yet remote. The green brilliance of transferal shone again, and Metrasor's two sons arrived. The littlest one ran to he father, burying his small face in the old man's shoulder.

Metrasor hugged him tightly, then looking up at the older boy held out his arm. Kishkor ran to him as well and they stood, hugging for nearly a minute before Metrasor gently pulled them away so that he could look into their faces.

"This is the time we have spoken of. You remember?"

"Yes, father," the youngest one answered first. He looked down for a moment, then back up. "Will we really never see you again?"

Metrasor swallowed visibly. "We have spoken of all this before, Oreb."

"I don't think you love us very much," he said after a minute.

"I know it seems that way," Metrasor stroked his son's head. "But that is not so. I must do what the Creator commands. You know of His goodness, don't you?"

"I know He took mother away," the older boy blurted out suddenly. Metrasor looked down, away from his sons' faces for a time.

"I must do what is commanded," the Mhyrnian said. "Now come. Be brave, as your Mother would want. Come on."

Oreb came forward, sniffing, while Kishkor turned his back on his father. Metrasor hugged Oreb fiercely then looked up. "Please, Kishkor!"

Kishkor would not.

"It is time," Metrasor said after another minute. He looked at Melana for help.

"I can't do this!" she stepped back, shaking her head.

"You must," the Mhyrnian said evenly. "It seems we are all being tried."

Melana looked suddenly ashen. After a moment, she stepped forward and gently took Oreb from his father. Without a backward glance, Kishkor ran for the Nebo, all but stumbling up the ramp to get inside. Oreb was crying audibly. Melana picked him up and held him close. She looked at Metrasor with an expression Reeber could not discern. For the first time he could not sense her. After a moment, she turned away and started toward the Nebo.

"Soon, I will be with my beloved again," Metrasor said to Reeber. "And I will come to you again, someday. This I promise. I will not leave you alone to discover all the ancient holy secrets by yourself. But even with my help, the road will be difficult. If you refuse this, now is the time to speak."

But Reeber said nothing. The rightness of it burned inside him. He nodded his head once to the Mhyrnian in a show of the deep, curious respect he felt for this old sage. Then he turned and went toward the Bellatrix.

Soon, they were all on board--all, except the Lady Portia. Reeber watched from the entrance of the Nebo. She conversed with the old Mhyrnian. Reeber could not hear what they were saying. It was not for him *to* hear. He knew this--accepted it. He gazed in wonder at them. She wiped her cheeks with her palms and nodded energetically. At last the ancient Mhyrnian held out his arms and she embraced him.

"You coming?" Reeber called to her. She shook her head. Her face was more peaceful, more

energetic than Reeber had ever seen on her. Her answer revealed a struggling against emotion too strong for her to contain.

"I am the Voice of Polyphemus," she said, wiping her eyes again. "He has forgiven me my pride, and I must stay to heal the evils here."

Reeber nodded. For a moment he felt like a child caught up in a goodbye he could not fully understand nor have any power to stop. It was a goodbye more poignant than it should be. He hesitated for only a moment more, then holding the artifacts close to him, much as Collins had done only a few minutes earlier, stepped inside the Nebo. As the ramp lifted toward closure, Reeber caught a final glimpse of Metrasor and the Lady Portia. The brilliant green radiance enveloped then and they were gone.

Sounds of massive machinery rumbled from around the shuttle. The ceiling opened overhead, revealing the true skies of the Old World and the incredible spectacle of the Eye of Polyphemus. The star shuttle's engines whined up toward white power. Mere moments after the entrance to the Nebo closed, the sleek vessel lifted silently from its resting-place in the vaulting hall and soared upward into the night.

V

Collins lifted his head from the carnage. His mouth was wet. He wiped his hand across his chin and found blood there. He looked down in horror at the mutilated carcass he had been feeding on. It was Hastings. An acrid pall filled the air--a heavy tobacco-choking stench mingled with singed flesh and the sickening sweet odor or rotting death. He looked up to see the old, crackpot Mhyrnian who stood in flames so white it hurt to look at him, and the smell of burning flesh came from him. Of this, Collins was certain. Though how he was certain, he did not know. He looked down to see a burning torch in his hand and knew that he had used it himself to set the Mhyrnian on fire. The old shaman wore an expression of calmness as he burned, and soon there remained only a skeleton of him, and then just the flames.

Now, Collins stood amid ruined worlds and decimated cities. Dismembered bodies lay strewn about as far as he could see. He stared at each one in fascination and found that he recognized them. Some were students he had known from decades gone by. Others were associates he had worked with, others he had worked for and ruined in his climb toward his seat on the General Hexibuneral Council.

A dark curiosity drove him to try to find the Lady Portia. Something drew his gaze upward. A single, gigantic eye scowled down at him and beyond that he saw the Lady Portia drifting off into bright, impossibly remote regions. Not far from her he found Reeber, holding the Mhyrn artifacts. The objects shone a golden radiance that seared Collins' eyes as he gazed upon them. Reeber stood surrounded by twelve terrifying-looking warriors. Collins cowered beneath the awful, golden brilliance--whimpering, trying to climb down through the rocks to some imagined safety beneath them--clawing at them until his fingertips bled against the stone.

Suddenly, the spectacle fell away and Collins came to himself. It took him a moment to gain his bearings. He was drenched in perspiration and a single trail of drool ran down the right side of his mouth. He wiped it dry with the back of his hand and looked around him.

Men and women staggered all about the conference room. One woman was sobbing, sitting on the floor like a spoiled child caught up in a crying frenzy she had no power to stop. Collins looked behind him. Ferris, one of his most trusted security guards, lay motionless on the floor. His expression was frozen in absolute agony. Collins knelt beside him. It took only a moment for him to

recognize that Ferris was dead.

What had happened? Collins stood up again and saw Merrimoor climbing to his feet, holding his head. The Mhyrnian looked up at Collins. There was blood trickling from his nostrils.

"What the Gates happened?!" Collins shouted at him and felt a stab of pain cut through his head at the sound of his own voice. It all but paralyzed him beneath an agony that threatened to thrust him down into unconsciousness.

But Merrimoor did not answer him. Instead, the Mhyrnian Ambassador--the First Chieftain of Mhyrn, fell to his knees, muttering a fervent prayer of some sort in Mhyrnese.

"The artifacts!" Collins finally located himself. "Where are the artifacts?"

No one answered him. No one seemed to care, or seemed capable of caring.

Suddenly the lights went out.

"Master Collins," a voice tranzed inside his head. "The graviton reactors about The Eye show signs of shutting down permanently. Should we fire up the hydro-fusion reactors as a backup?"

Collins pushed the query aside and tranzed out something else on his own priority circuit.

"Security! Where are Clement Reeber and the others? Where's the Mhyrnian and Commodore Morse?"

The lights flickered back on for a moment, then went off again. Across the room, somebody had manually opened a wall to let in the moonlight. How long had they been out?

Security answered his tranz. "They cannot be located. But a short time ago, the Temple of the Muse opened and a shuttle lifted into space, flying directly toward The Eye."

"Did you scan it?"

"We did, but it must be a Mestrate ship for we could discern nothing within it."

"Burn me!" Collins hissed. He thought anxiously for a moment. "Are any of the Vanguards here?"

"Yes, sir. The Cygnus."

"I am ordering a prime security closure. No vessels of any sort are to enter or leave Polyphemus without my strict permission!"

"But sir, that will cripple . . ."

"Do it!" Collins cut the tranz circuit off. "Attention, Vanguard Cygnus," Collins bent down and taking the depolarizer from his dead security guard strapped it about his waist.

"This is the Cygnus. Melrose speaking. This is a restricted biotranz channel. Who is this, please?"

"Hexibuneralist Collins. Transfer me aboard immediately!"

"Of course, sir. Stand by. Melrose off."

The green brilliance of transferal closed about Collins and a moment later he found himself on the bridge of the Cygnus.

Collins had never actually been aboard a Vanguard before. He was hardly prepared for the experience. Above him loomed incredible, building-sized double helix control towers. In their midst stood one that soared perhaps a hundred stories upward. Numerous control stations clustered all up and down the helixes, each occupied by glowing crew who moved their hands within arrays of shining, hovering crystals.

"My God," Collins whispered. He felt an overwhelming sense of dread, here. It hung over his heart like a dull knife that pierced him to the very core. He almost turned aside from his intent and at that thought he felt some of the heaviness subside. But Collins let it subside just enough to allow room for the intense anger and hatred he felt for Reeber and the Lady Portia to flare up again with even more fervent sharpness.

Fired with resolve, he turned about him and saw a man wearing the uniform of command standing beside a darkly cloaked figure too tall to be human. He began to address the commander when the Mhyrnian turned around to face him. It was the same interloper who had stolen the artifacts. Collins strode over and grasping the Mhyrnian's robe by the neck yanked his face down to his.

"So! It *is* you!" he all but screamed at him. "Where are they?! What did you do to me?"

The Mhyrnian answered in a quiet voice. "They are beyond your reach."

Collins shoved the Mhyrnian aside, shouting into the commander's face. "Do you know you have a thief and a traitor here?"

Melrose stood quietly. "Sir?"

"This Mhyrnian! He has stolen Federation property and aided in the escape of dangerous individuals. I want him taken into custody, NOW--and I want you to track the Mestrate ship that just recently left the Old World."

"We *are* monitoring that vessel," Melrose turned to the great dome that arched above them. Collins looked up as well. The Eye of Polyphemus stretched outward before the Cygnus. Its accretion nebulae swirled visibly. As Collins' eyes searched, they soon fell upon a dazzling shape--a starship, glowing with a silver-gold brilliance: the Nebo. Dazzling sprays of amber energies coursed about it, shooting and firing outward into the nebulae where they traced impossibly complex patterns across first one black hole, then twisting and convoluting, leapt and touched another black hole, then another, and another.

"I want you to hail them!" Collins spun on his heal. "Order them to surrender at once! If they refuse, go in after them!"

"Sir," Melrose said slowly and evenly. "We cannot go in after it. The cosmic forces of The Eye are too great. Even a Vanguard might be torn apart."

"How the Gates are *they* surviving?!" he gestured widely back toward the Nebo.

"The shuttle is utilizing an inter-dimmensional cross phasing called the phantom mode," Metrasor spoke quietly. "It is not really completely here in this universe at this moment."

Collins glanced back at the Mhyrnian. "Get him the Gates out of here," he spat at Melrose, then turned to look at the Mhyrnian. "Or are you going to hypnotize us again? That won't work twice, you know."

Metrasor looked down. "There was no hypnosis. Anything you may have seen when the Mhyrnian chieftain revealed my robes of office came only from within you. It only revealed your true self to you."

"Yeah! Sure!" Collins turned on Melrose again. "Hail them!"

"Impossible, sir. The gravitational turbulences of The Eye make communication of any variety impossible."

"Then fire on them--disable them and pull them in with traction energy."

Melrose stood uneasily for a moment.

"Well?"

"I cannot do that, sir."

"What? I'm the Commander in Chief! You must obey any order I give you!"

"I am aware of my duties, sir. But I will not fire on that ship."

Melrose fell backward at Collins' blow across the chin. The muscular Commander managed to right himself almost immediately and stood again with quiet resolution.

"You're relieved!" Collins hissed a curse under his breath, turned and grabbed a nearby ensign by the arm. It was a young woman who had paused to stare, appalled at what had just happened.

"You--ensign!"

"Sir," she answered, her voice weak.

"You're in command, now! Field promotion. You will show me the operation of the Vanguard's offensive weaponry. Now!"

"I don't . . ." The young woman looked at Melrose.

"Don't look at him for permission. I am Commander in Chief! Do it!"

The woman nodded once and turned, walking to the nearest double helix tower behind them. Collins followed, eagerly.

She led him to one of several glowing consoles that clustered about the base of the twisting tower. Its crystal arrays floated in the air at about waist height.

"This is a Talarian sword. Slip your hands between these controls, grasp the bar inside and look where you wish to fire. At your specific mental command to fire, the weapon will discharge."

Collins slipped into the station, thrusting his hands into the glow that sparkled between the control points. Instantly, he felt a shimmering change of temperature about his hands, as if they had suddenly immersed in warm, surging water. He looked up at the Nebo.

"Don't fire," the deep voice heavy with Mhyrnese accent spoke from behind him. The power of that voice shook Collins so that he turned to see if someone new had come in. But he saw only Metrasor standing there, his dark cloak opened casually. Within it the Mhyrnian wore only a modest tunic. The glowing robe was gone!

"Sir--this is the way of things," Metrasor wore that same, calm expression Collins had seen on him in his the vision; the very same calm expression he had shown while being literally consumed in the midst of the flames. "You need only rest now and all can yet be well. Just stop this and soon the shuttle will be gone. Salvation can come at last to the galaxy."

Collins laughed once and turned to fix his eyes on the Nebo.

"This is your last opportunity to escape the horrors you beheld in your vision!" Metrasor said, stepping closer. "Can't you see? That is why I have come back--to reclaim you--to give you a final chance. There is still time for you to change--to make the right choice and not try to interfere."

Collins stared at the old Mhyrnian for long seconds.

"But if you do not choose rightly, destruction awaits!" Metrasor stepped closer, resting his hand on Collins' shoulder. "Soften your resolve and much can yet be yours."

For a moment, Collins hesitated. He felt another flicker of hope, but when he turned to look into Metrasor's eyes his anger roared up suddenly like a white-hot flood. He moved his hand to the depolarizer. Metrasor must have sensed it, for he said "The Creator has power to deliver me, even now. But if not, I will go to Him, and know this: If you do not turn aside from the intent of your heart, I must and will stand as witness against you at the Day of All Restitution."

"Who the Gates do you think you are to tell me such things?! There is no God! There is no Heaven! There is no Devil! There is no Day of Restitution! *Here* is where real power resides!" He whispered to Metrasor, yanking at his depolarizer and pulling it out.

He fired on the Mhyrnian.

Metrasor disappeared in dazzling, orange flames--a blinding flash that smelled of burnt flesh. The vision Collins had suffered only minutes earlier flashed searing, sickeningly back into his mind at the stench. For a fleeting moment he felt that awful fear of being in a nightmare from which there could now be no escape, for the nightmare is acted out in reality. The sense of dread he felt earlier hardened within him again but somehow, miraculously, he managed to push it aside, throwing the depolarizer to the floor and thrusting his hands back in the Talarian Sword's control glow.

"Stop right there!" a voice barked at him. "Do nothing. Stand away from the weapons

console!"

Collins sought the Nebo with his eyes. When he found it, he gave a hungry, boastful, mental command to fire.

"Step away from the controls! Now!"

Seconds passed. Nothing happened.

"Fire!" he said vocally.

Nothing.

"Sir, if you do not step away from the controls *I* will open fire."

Collins turned to see a powerful-looking guard brandishing an Acrucian blaster aimed directly at his head. Beyond him Collins saw the other five members of the Hexibuneral walking toward him. Other guards wearing Hexibuneral security uniforms stepped forward, holding weapons of their own. These buzzed with their own glowing, violet readiness.

"It's all right," Chelle Cottrell, the Hexibuneralist over Communications stepped forward. "The Cygnus will not obey his order to fire." Then to Collins. "Enough of this, Markus! Give yourself up, now."

"I will be obeyed!" Collins whispered to himself, and in that moment of desperation, he looked upward again to try to find the Nebo. Instead he saw five Vanguards, drifting into protective positions between the Cygnus and the Eye.

"No," Chelle said. "The Cygnus will not obey your order to fire! You will not be allowed to stop them. Polyphemus has so ordered it."

"Why are you here? I'm in command here!"

"We came at Polyphemus' request--brought here by the Vanguards you see there. You must stop this! My grief, Markus--you've just murdered a man! Doesn't that mean anything to you? And all of this--*this*! Why are you trying to interfere with the natural order?"

"What natural order?"

"The order of Polyphemus! It . . ."

"But, it's a lie!" Collins shouted. "*They're* the criminals! They're the ones . . . why can't you see? The Voice of Polyphemus is a traitor, I tell you! A traitor!!" He then saw the Lady Portia step out from behind the other Hexibuneralists.

"You're right, I'm afraid," she said evenly. "I was a traitor--for a while. But not any longer."

"Move away from the console, sir," the nearest guard said.

"No! Don't you realize? This was *my* discovery! *My* work! *I* am the Executor! I *must* be obeyed! I'll take out the other Vanguards if I have to! Fire, Burn you to all Gates!!" he shouted at the Cygnus.

His hands began to tingle, then grow hot. He looked down to see blue flames flaring out from between the glowing crystals. They flashed past his fingers with searing heat. He yanked his hands out of the controls and felt a security field immediately tug them together before him in a soft, unyielding restraint.

"I'll see you all ruined! I'm Commander in Chief! I must be obeyed!! Burn it, get these restraints off me! Now!"

He heard someone gasp. As he turned to look, he saw Melrose, the Lady Portia, and everyone staring in disbelief at something back behind him, and up over his head. A sudden hope sprang up inside him. The Nebo must be coming back--giving itself up. Now he *would* ruin them all and proclaim himself Supreme Executor, free from the all the foolish, superstitious, tradition-bound rules of the Hexibuneral. He would be sovereign Lord of the Galaxy--perhaps even--someday, when the people were ready-- Emperor. Smiling, he turned to gloat at the sight of his enemies' surrender, a surge of frothing triumph fervent within him.

But he did not see what he had expected.

"It's gone!" Someone whispered.

Behind the five Vanguards, space was empty. There remained only an incredibly, dark void where, moments before, a thousand black holes with their magnificent accretion nebulae had hung in unimagined power. And with the Eye of Polyphemus, the Nebo had vanished as well.

The End of Book Two

Leave a message for this story.

Continued from page 28

we need that sort of encouragement here just now."

"Oh, one never knows, does one? Anyway, I was just wondering if Missing found a position yet. One of my girls has run off to get married," the baker said.

"Yes, she's been employed by Esmariah Gasp."

"Oh, well. I'll just have to take the boy then."

There was a silence at the door, and in the kitchen.

"That would be a wonderful opportunity Ivy, but how did you know–oh yes, do come in, where are my manners?"

Ivy bustled into the kitchen, leading Aunt Orangia along behind her. Her red hair was neatly bundled under her brown and green scarf, and her cheeks glowed with early-morning enthusiasm. She carried a long loaf of still-steaming bread, liberally spiced with fragrant herbs, which she set on the table and sat down next to. Without a word she pulled off a bit of the tip, plucked it apart, and scattered the pieces across the table-top. She gazed at them for a moment, then looked up at Roger and winked.

"Buttons are all well and good, but I find the bread much more telling," she said. Roger was immediately drawn to her side. Missing saw a rabid interest in his face.

"How did you know?" he asked.

"Oh, you might be surprised at what I know. Now," said Ivy, pointing. "I see this large bit of crust here has landed to the right of this piece with the herb sticking out of it. Shows you're hard-working and honest. Next we see this fluffy piece over here with this other fluffy piece," she lowered her voice, "which shows a romantic heart."

Roger blushed deeply and fidgeted with his hands. Ivy put one of the fluffy pieces in her mouth and chewed on it for a moment while continuing her reading.

"There's some talent there," she said. "Call yourself a wizard but you've been wasting your time with those curatives. Certainly they work well enough, if one can live with the waiting period. But you know there isn't anything going into them that couldn't come straight out of you. Who's been training you?"

"No one really. I was named after an old relative who was a wizard. He left some journals behind and I've been reading those."

Ivy consulted the crumbs. "Mmm. Still floundering around in the shallows of the romantic riptide, I see. That will change soon enough."

Roger's flesh turned scarlet all the way under his fingernails. Missing stifled a giggle. Ivy was a very honest woman. So honest, in fact, that Aunt Orangia arranged a special day with the baker for Missing when she was twelve, in which certain delicate issues were discussed. Ivy had been very blunt, using some soft breads and rolls as allegory.

Ivy broke off a large piece of the bread and handed it to him. "This will help," she said. "I see a lot of things here that intrigue me. And I've heard of your concerns about the mines. I'll take you on. Pay you three pennions a week."

"To do what?"

"Bake bread, of course."

"It's a good offer, Roger," Aunt Orangia said. "Your parents could do worse than have a baker in the family. Everyone needs to eat."

"I don't think I really want to be a baker." He frowned.

"Yes, but you do want to know about the mines, don't you?" Ivy said. "There's a lot to be found in bread. Including salt. Want to know where I buy my salt, Roger?"

He didn't reply.

"From the Sealyham mine," she said. "The Sealyham salt has a lot to say about you, my boy."

Roger looked at Ivy. Ivy looked at Roger.

So it was agreed that Roger would become an apprentice baker. He left with Ivy not long after the reading, and Missing began the long climb to the Gasp House.

She was met in the bare side parlor that morning by Esmariah. Utter was nowhere to be seen, but there were loud thumps and curses from upstairs that indicated the movement of furniture and his extreme displeasure. The woman was playing with her dog–if throwing a small bundle of fabric and then ignoring it when it was brought back could be called playing. The dog found this deliriously entertaining.

"Missing," the woman said. "There's a boy you know. Tried to get into my mine yesterday. Why?"

Missing was caught in the force of her gaze. It seemed to be neither angry, nor really very curious. Just–acutely interested.

"I hardly know him," she said. "My aunt took him in for meals. He thinks there's something wrong with the mine. They're afraid it's going to collapse, I think."

"Ah."

"And the Inquisitor Morwin Croomb says he's going to tell the king about it," Missing added. She did not know why she did. All she knew was that Esmariah's gaze, when focused on her, seemed to be calling all the details out in a firm and undeniable voice.

"Croomb. I see."

"They're only worried about Manking," Missing said. "It doesn't really have anything to do with you."

The subtlest of shifts indicated this was the wrong thing to say.

"Worried about Manking," Esmariah murmured. The dog, unable to contain itself, whined. She silenced it with a scathing glance and it slunk away under the chair, looking embarrassed.

"I have been worried about Manking all my life," she said. "I have split my flesh for this city, sucked out my own marrow for this city. The Gasp mine was the first to put salt on its ships and send them off and bring back the gold they crave. Is *that* not enough for them?"

She did not thunder or rave, but in the question was an indication of a deep and grievous wound Missing did not understand.

"It has everything to do with me," Esmariah said. She sank into the chair and the dog, perhaps afraid of being crushed, leapt up onto her lap. She scratched behind its ears absently.

"Utter will be needing help upstairs." The woman dismissed her with a wave. Like the dog, Missing slunk away.

She was met in the hall by the sight of Cadaberous Bray. How he had gotten in without making a sound was a mystery. He was standing very still, listening, and his eyes found hers immediately. She had been right about his height–he would have to bend to cross under any doorway. His black great-coat was too hot for the day and did not quite fit him. The bones of his wrists stuck out like pale spurs and his fingers were clasped together; the tangled twigs of some diseased tree. Those pale eyes, not any particular color but all of them thrown together unflatteringly, regarded her.

"Missing," he said. She nodded as a moment of silence passed. "I see Esmariah has spoken to you about the boy. It would be unfortunate to find that a friend of yours were involved in any illicit behavior. Unfortunate."

Missing was too busy holding back a bitter bile to speak.

"I would appreciate it if you would alert me to any such further–planned intrusions," he said.

"My offices are on the corner of Marbelous and Weyne, in the upstairs back. My family has served the Gasps for generations–one might say we began our service here, though that would be incorrect. We began our service elsewhere. The Gasps just happened to come along at the right time."

He shook his head to clear it of whatever thoughts had poured from his mouth in those strange words.

"Anyway. We must both be concerned for our employer now, mustn't we?"

She nodded, then watched from some space outside herself as he crossed the hall and lay long, manicured fingers on her arm. The touch was so light she could barely feel it through her sleeve, but it sent a slow shiver over her shoulders and down her thighs. She looked up into his eyes and smelled the slightest hint of mint misting from his mouth with his slow breath.

"You and I, Missing, are different. We know, don't we, how *deeply* some things run. I can smell it on you. People like us, we stink of it, but only to one another. Do you smell it too?"

His brow puckered only the slightest bit. Missing felt her heart pounding in the cage of her chest.

"No," she whispered, lying. It was only a lie because she felt the truth of it somewhere within, but did not want to acknowledge any shared experience with this stick man, this unsettling thing, this cadaver who spoke the sorts of words she only thought in.

"Ah." He drew back, and let her arm go. "I see. Should you have any other concerns, feel free to stop by, during business hours," he said. Then he blinked and released her.

She hurried down the hall toward the kitchen, pausing under the back stairs a moment to let her heart find its rhythm again. She did know what Bray was talking about, had known of it for years and dismissed it as an unsettling oddity in her nature. It was the smell of the wharves and the old molds on buildings and the passage of people through Penham-Wynek; not unpleasant, but a certain heaviness that indicated their deeper belonging in the shifting tides of the city. Some people would come and go. Some would stay, some had always been there, and those that did had that smell on them. They smelled of old things, no matter how young they were. It clung to them. Ivy had it. Bray had it. Occasionally she smelled it on her aunt, and Esmariah and Eleganta both reeked of it. Missing had often wondered whether she had it. Apparently, she did.

When she composed herself, she continued on to the kitchen and found Utter standing in a shadowed doorway not far from the entry. His hands were clenched into fists and he had a small sliver of wood in his mouth that he was splitting into shreds with his teeth.

"Listen." He scowled. "Don't you never go to that Cadaberous Bray for no reason, hear?"

She nodded. "He makes my skin crawl."

"That friend of yours, tried to break into the mine," Utter said, as he led her back upstairs. "What was his name again?"

"Roger."

"Sitting in prison for a few days, I expect?"

"Actually, no. An Inquisitor, a friend of my aunt's, let him out. He's working at a bakery in the Shunts today."

"Hmph. Coulda saved him a lot of trouble."

"How so?"

"Never you mind. Only help me get this divan downstairs. The appraiser's coming to pick it up before lunch."

The lunch of cold stew–unsalted–was a welcome relief from the lifting of furniture. Esmariah did not join them, being occupied with Bray over her accounts. Utter gave Missing a tray to carry in, pointedly laying out only one setting. As she approached the side-parlor she heard the two

murmuring quietly.

"–it was gone when I went back this morning," Bray said. "I can only assume the payment was acceptable. I am certain we will see something soon."

"I'm wondering about hiring a few peasants to work it for a while. Your way worked well enough in the beginning, Bray, but it's not working anymore, is it? I'm down to portrait frames and knick-knacks."

"You must trust me, Esmariah. After all, mine is a family business, passed on for generations. It's in our blood, you might say. I've never failed you before."

"We've never had this kind of problem before. Even your ancient ancestors never mentioned anything like this."

"Yet I shall continue to do as my ancient ancestors have, as my father taught me, knowing this is the only way in which the thing can be appeased."

"Still. Acting as my solicitor now. Can you say that attempting to acquire the Sealyham mine is foolish?"

There was a pause.

"No," he said. "Although I doubt Eleganta will make it easy for you."

"I know that. And I know how to handle her. But I've got other things in the works, just in case."

"Yes. The fellow you sent to Western Pressing. Any word from him yet?"

"Nothing promising. He's watching them carefully, but hasn't seen a sign of an heir since he got there. Says the Sealyhams are fatuously popular with the locals, so no one will say a word to a stranger about them. It will take more time, he says. And money, of course."

"So then, another offer to the Sulks seems in order."

At that, Missing went in. "I can take it," she said.

They both looked up at her.

"The message to the Sulks," she said. "I can take it and be back by this afternoon." She set the tray down on the rickety little side-table. The dog sat up to sniff at it.

"Initiative," Bray noted.

"I shall have to compose the note, since it was really only an idea thus far," Esmariah said. She raised one eyebrow. "But I will call for you."

The woman called only a half hour later and handed Missing another piece of paper, sealed. She stuffed it into her pocket and traipsed out of the house. Once in the Shunts she saw very little activity, and the door to Ivy's bakery was closed. It took very little time to cross through the High District, though it seemed long in her mind. Finally she was at the Sulk gate, waved through by the Sulk guards, and greeting the Sulk doorman cheerfully. He nodded her in and she stood before the door to the side parlor once again, knocking.

This time it was Titus who answered. A wan smile crossed his face.

"I've brought another message," she said, completely forgetting her practiced greeting.

"Is that so?" He glanced back over his shoulder into the room. "You know the way to Gran's room don't you?"

Her face must have fallen, because he gave a little laugh. "I'm only teasing. It won't take but a moment." From behind him in the room Missing thought she heard a rustle of clothing and a sigh. She ignored it, however, for the chance to gaze happily at his boot heels again as they climbed the stairs. In the hallway they passed an open door. Wendley was sitting outside it on the floor, gnawing on a roasted chicken leg. Secretive whispers emanated from within. Titus pressed his finger against his lips, motioning for her to listen.

"No, it's 't' then '*y*' I'm telling you. I looked it up yesterday when we got home."

"I *told* you to make sure. How's it going to look if we go around misspelling everything?"

"What difference can it make? None of them can read anyway."

"They'll have to get someone to read it for them, then. And hurry up with that title, Dandy."

"If I *hurry* I can't put in the curly parts."

"What are they doing?" Titus asked.

Wendley shrugged. "Some great and secret project. She said no boys allowed."

"How's the courting going?"

Wendley sucked at a thread of meat in his teeth, then went after it with his fingernail. "I wouldn't mind a chair to sit in out here."

Prudity appeared suddenly at the door, her eyes narrowed. "Titus! No *boys* allowed." She glared at Missing. "Do I know you?"

"I was here yesterday," Missing said.

"Oh yes, the Gasp maid."

"How did the Rickets turn out?"

"Terribly." Prudity scowled. "Cook had to use the chicken for dinner so I didn't get my points."

"Too bad," Missing said.

"Wendley." The girl turned her eyes on him. "You're supposed to give the secret knock if anyone comes. Don't forget next time."

"Can I have a chair?" he asked.

Prudity answered by closing the door. Titus and Missing looked at one another in shared amusement, then continued down to the elder Sulk's room.

Eleganta Sulk was awake this time, and having her hair done. Fitchley burrowed among the white wisps with an array of combs and pins; all jeweled, all dusty.

"Titus," she croaked, and smiled, showing off her perfect teeth.

"Hello Gran." He sighed and went to place a reluctant kiss on her waddled cheek. "There's another message from Esmariah." He looked at Missing.

"It's in my pocket," she said. He raised one eyebrow, then a smile tugged at his lips.

"Oh yes." He crossed over to her and drew the letter out, very slowly, his fingers grazing her thigh again. For all that she had contrived to make him touch her, Missing was astonished to feel her flesh shrink back under his touch. Then, as his hand drew away, sensation pattered up and down her leg, her hip, crawled across her belly, and burst open in her chest so that she was momentarily afraid she would fall down and lie gasping for air on the carpet like some strange fish.

He turned away, unaware of her distress. His grandmother eyed the letter briefly. Then she crumpled it up and threw it into the fireplace.

"Fifteen percent," she said. "With a five percent deposit." Then she rose, scattering pins and combs. She moved with the careful, stilted grace of an insect along a branch–similarly clothed in a hard carapace of bone stays beneath the cloth dressings of her corset. She turned to hold onto the back of her large chair. "Fitchley. Tighten me."

Fitchley stuck his tongue between his teeth and eyed the back of her dress. Then he grabbed hold of two strings, and began to pull as if towing a small ship ashore. As far as Missing could see, there was no more room for tightening, which made his job more difficult. Yet the Lady Sulk gasped.

"Not tight enough! Tighter Fitchley. Tighter!"

Fitchley set his foot in the middle of her flat backside and hauled away, his tongue between his teeth. The ancient maven threw back her head, and some of her jeweled combs spilled out of her hair

onto the rug, throwing her white hair free. One long rope fell over his lips and he grabbed onto it with his teeth as if to use it to tighten her further. Missing could hear him growling a little.

"Tighter Fitchley! Ahh-ahhh, tighter, yes! That's *it*, Fitchley! Almost *there!*"

At that point, Titus took hold of Missing's arm and led her out. Too soon they were at the front door again, and Missing put her hands to her cheeks to cool them.

"Shall I walk you back?" He was looking away at the parlor, and a brief expression of regret passed over his face. She ignored it.

"If you like." She shrugged, struggling valiantly for dignity.

"I'll just–" He sighed a little. "I'll just go and get my things."

He crept back into the parlor, closing the door. Missing heard nothing until he reappeared again, fastening a small money-pouch to his belt. It clinked with coins. The door was slammed behind him by some errant wind. Titus winced.

"Well," he said. "One must attend to business first."

They wandered back through the High District, Titus setting a quick pace that was not difficult for Missing to match, though she would have preferred something slower. She imagined something like a long stroll. There were several items in shop windows she noticed on the way that she thought she might point out and say something witty about, giving them an opportunity for conversation. Not to be diverted from the plan, she attempted to do so as they hurried along.

"I would bet money those are hard to walk in." She pointed out a pair of women's shoes that appeared to have been constructed with small ladders in mind.

"Yes, well, I suppose the right sort of woman wouldn't really have any trouble," he answered.

Missing blushed. It was not the answer she hoped for.

"Have you been stripping any more walls lately?"

"Not since yesterday. Today we've been moving furniture to be sold."

"How soon will she do that, do you think?"

Missing shrugged. "I don't really know."

By this time they were back in the Shunts. Missing saw a small crowd had gathered around Ivy's bakery. Dark smoke rolled out of the front door, and Roger was standing out front. He was covered in dough.

"It's all right," he reassured the passing curious. "Just a small fire and we've put it out anyway. Nothing to worry about."

Missing, trotting along now at Titus' heels, tried very hard not to catch his eye.

"Oh, hello," Roger said. He smiled.

"Friend of yours?" Titus stopped.

"Yes, I'm Roger." Roger stuck out his hand. Titus ignored it.

"You're a baker."

"Well, I'm trying." Roger grinned. "I had an argument with the ovens though."

Titus bared his teeth a little. "Difficult job, baking, I expect. What with the following of recipes and all."

Roger narrowed his eyes. "Harder than some might think," he said. "Honest work usually is."

The two young men looked at one another. Missing fidgeted from one foot to the other.

"Well," said Titus. "Perhaps I'll just leave you here then, with your friend. I really have something I need to take care of."

The word *stay* formed on her lips but never made it past her tongue. She looked at Roger, who was glaring at Titus, and nodded glumly. Of course he wouldn't want to have anything to do with

her right now. Roger brushed his hair back out of his face, prematurely aging himself with streaks of flour. Titus turned and hurried away down an alley.

"Who was that fop?" Roger asked.

Missing turned on him. "He isn't a baker, at least." Then she flounced away without another look back.

She followed Titus' path down the side alley, not quite sure why she did. There wasn't any reason for it, he would only double back and go home. But she was very curious about him. About the things he did. About his thoughts and dreams and ideas. She wanted to know them all, and wrap them up in ribbons in her mind.

She saw him disappear into a side-door and lingered a few feet away in a doorway. A few minutes later he hurried out again, re-tying an empty purse to his belt. Then, as expected, he headed south toward home. Missing crept up to view the door he had exited.

It was a bookkeeping establishment for "Gentleman's Gaming." There were no windows. But of course Titus was a gentleman. There was nothing wrong with betting–it was not illegal in Manking. Yet her aunt had always proclaimed it a foolish waste of time, as the poor often do, to brush off the envy for those who could afford it. Of course even the poor who couldn't afford it often indulged. Many of them were then sent, by their spouses, to beg from Esmariah Gasp. Penham-Wynek was not immune to the scandals of weak men, and women, who held tight to the belief that this "last bet" would make them rich as kings. And if it wasn't this one, it would be the next. Meanwhile the children went hungry and the rent was late and more than one family began selling off furniture to pay their debts, and men and women did things in the night that they would never speak of to anyone because loans were easy enough to come by, but the loans must be repaid.

Missing eyed the door with a frown, then left the alley and returned to the Gasp house. When she reported the answer from the Sulks, her employer rose and began to pace the room.

"Go and ask Utter how many rooms we've got left," she ordered. Missing ran upstairs to where the man was still moving furniture, then ran back down again.

"Seventeen."

"Not enough," Esmariah muttered. "Not enough. Inform Utter I will be taking a walk on the back lawn for the rest of the afternoon."

Most of the larger furniture was gone, leaving the four rooms they stripped empty as unoccupied halls. Without their gold and books and knick-knacks and fine furnishings they were really no more than paint and plaster–not so much grandly sparse as emptily cavernous. Despite the fact there was nothing left, they cleaned those rooms as vigorously as if they had been fully occupied.

Later in the afternoon, Utter went to open a window for air while Missing finished scrubbing the wooden floor. He grunted to himself after gazing down a moment.

"Some boy mucking around out there by the gate," he said.

Missing rose quickly to look, but it was not Titus. Instead it was Roger's brown hair and contemplative expression that eyed the front of the house.

"That's just Roger."

"He's opening the gate." Utter scowled at this imminent threat to his morning's work.

"He'll walk on it," Missing said. "Trust me. If there is anyone who would walk on a newly-raked drive, it's Roger."

"He's come all the way in," Utter said. "Closing the gate behind him, looking at it and–he's stepped on the grass!" The old man pounded his fist down on the windowsill in satisfaction. "Stepped on the *grass*, I tell you! Bright boy!"

Missing sighed. "I suppose."

When she went down to open the door she found Roger standing there with a grin.

"It's nearly dinner time," he said. "I thought I'd just come along and walk home with you."

It occurred to Missing that, with the Shunts so near Penham-Wynek Lane, he would actually have had to make an extra trip to come get her. She was about to say something sarcastic when she realized that although he wasn't the person she *really* wanted coming to walk her home after work, it was a nice thing to do. And it was better than walking alone. And his face was effused with a sort of enthusiastic self-satisfaction that was hard to resist.

"Thank you, Roger. That's very nice of you." She closed the door and accompanied him down the drive.

"I could do it every day if you like."

"Well, it's quite a climb for you. Perhaps just every other day, to save your strength. How did the baking go?"

"Much better after we put the fire out," he said. "You know, I think Ivy knows how to bake any sort of bread there is. And she can do things to bread that–well. Did you know adding alarinth to crumpets will make a man want to spend more time with his wife? Although I don't really understand that. If *I* were getting married, I think I'd choose someone I got along with in the first place."

Missing stifled a giggle. "I don't think that's the kind of "spending time" Ivy was talking about."

He thought about it a moment.

"Oh." His face fell and he blushed, looking over to see if she noticed. Missing tried to think of something encouraging worth saying.

"Although, I suppose if one *were* to go about it your way, one wouldn't need any crumpets with alarinth later on."

He held the gate open for her and they started down the slope of the hill on which the house sat.

"Uh oh," Roger said. "It's about that time. We'd better–"

Missing was suddenly flung rudely to the ground by an enormous and more than punctual tremor. This tremor appeared to have arrived early at the party and decided to announce itself by kicking in the door. Roger landed on top of her. They untangled themselves quickly and sat up, psychically agreeing *never* to mention whose hand had ended up where.

"W-w-worse t-t-today," Roger said, as his teeth continued to be rattled by the lingering upset. It seemed to roll under them this time, starting in one place and moving on in ripples that were only visible by the domino-effect of falling shingles traveling the length of the streets. The sharp shatters of pottery accompanied them, as well as various shouts and cursing. Somewhere nearby a wagon overturned. They looked out over the city as the shaking waned, but did not stop. The streets and buildings below them seemed to have been badly drawn and then re-traced by a shaky hand. Missing found her eyes drawn to Penham-Wynek in the distance.

Within a few minutes the tremor ended. A dreadful, shocked silence followed as things re-settled and people got back up. So it was that the city was entirely still for a single moment–and then there was the long, horrible moan and sharp retort of a splitting foundation. As she watched, one of the houses in Penham-Wynek Lane folded gently downward and submerged itself in dust and debris. The dust spread quickly, flowing down the corridor of the Lane and hiding most of it from sight.

"Aunt Orangia!"

Roger was already helping her to her feet. Together they maneuvered their way through the wreckage in the streets toward home. As they ran, Missing found that Roger was able to outdistance

her easily. She had always been a reluctant runner anyway. The same round part of her anatomy that would keep her from balancing well on high shoes also required a lot of readjustment in the process. But her concern for her aunt soon had her disregarding this discomfort and barreling down the street, setting her boot heels in the cobbles as if to plant posts.

They reached Penham-Wynek quickly and dove into the dust. It was already rising again, clearing away to a hazy curtain, and they could see the denizens of the lane had come out in full force, some of them following on Missing's heels. Roger pulled his shirt-collar up over his mouth and dashed into the place where the dust was thickest. Missing's eyes began to water, and she had to stop to hack out some miniscule bits of debris that had gotten to her throat via her nose.

"Missing?"

She turned to find Inquisitor Croomb approaching. He looked as if he had propelled his bulk for speed and had not yet considered stopping. In fact, he skidded to a stop on loose shale next to her, floundered, and would have gone down if she hadn't grabbed his arm.

Roger re-emerged only a second later. "It's all right," he gasped. "It isn't yours. It was the one just next door. Your aunt's outside."

"Is she–"

"She's fine. A little pale, but fine. There was no one home next door."

Missing put her hand over her mouth and braved the dust. She found her aunt as Roger had said, standing outside the house looking at the wreckage of what had been the next-door neighbors', her face wan and her hands twisted in her apron. Missing flung her arms around the woman and gave a small sob of relief. She could feel her aunt's rail-thin shoulders trembling a little, but the woman's voice was still firm.

"Now, now. What's all this fussing? I'm fine."

"What if you had died?" Missing said.

"Well, the fussing wouldn't have been much good then either, would it?" But she did have her arm around her niece's waist, and clung to it for a moment. "It'll be worse for poor Narigol when she gets home."

"Everything all right, Orangia?" Mister Croomb appeared.

"Morwin? What are you doing here?" She eyed him sharply.

"I was just in the area," he said. "Thought I'd stop in when that tremor hit and–never mind that. Are you hurt?"

"Of course not. The house is torn apart though."

"Bad luck." Croomb straightened his shoulders. "We'd better go have a look."

"I'm sure someone *somewhere* in this city is going to need you more than I do just now," Orangia said.

Mister Croomb narrowed his eyes and looked straight into hers.

"Let them wait."

The front door was swinging on its hinges, tilted now so that it didn't quite fit the frame. The interior of the house was a shambles. Shelves had fallen and everything on them smashed. Furniture was overturned, and the kitchen looked as though a small tornado had ripped into it. Two of the local strays had already taken advantage of this and were lapping up some spilled cream and eggs, though their fur was still bristled with fright and they hissed when the house's owner appeared.

"Oh, dear." Aunt Orangia picked up the two halves of a blue earthenware bowl. "My mother gave me this."

She turned her back on them and went to lean on the side-board. Missing couldn't be sure, but she thought she saw her aunt's shoulders shaking.

"Why don't you two take a look upstairs?" Mister Croomb said. "Orangia and I will take care of things down here."

At his suggestive nod, Roger and Missing left the kitchen. The stairs seemed a little lop-sided, now slanting to the left, but not so badly as to be un-climbable. Missing went immediately to her room, and Roger followed. It wasn't as bad as she had feared. One of the green window panes had smashed, but the other two were still intact. Her bed was upright, although now on the other side of the room. Her small dresser had spat open its drawers, fallen over, and regurgitated clothing all over the floor. Her books and papers were flung all around, obscuring the floor completely. The small box she kept her secret things in had been similarly upset and now lay empty. Missing, her heart in her throat, began rummaging among her belongings.

"Can you help me find a small necklace?" she said. "And a little piece of paper with a note on it?"

Roger nodded and began to tread delicately among her belongings. The digging went on in silence for several minutes.

"There's a lot of books here," he said.

"Yes." Missing's reply was distracted. She was looking for the glint of stones.

"And a lot of writing. Who wrote this?"

A deep suspicion made her turn suddenly. He was holding–yes, it was her poem for Penham-Wynek. She could tell by the crumpled right-hand corner. His eyes were already reading–he did not even need to move his lips at all. Before she could move he was finished.

Missing grew a little weak. No one read her poems. Not even her aunt. It was sacred territory, the most secret of secrets, those simple lines relaying deeper yearnings she had no intention of sharing with anyone, ever. The very words of the poem, the yearning, the heart-felt truth of it, came to her in a rush.

I speak to It while It sleeps, in whispered words cast low,
Of things that I have never seen– foreign lands, wild horses, snow.
In the day when It's awake I speak but common words,
I suspect Its busy mind dismisses what in the dark I know Its heart has heard.

Roger turned to her.

"I did," she said.

"It's very good." He perused it again. "About your street, isn't it?"

She gaped at him. "How did you know?"

"Well, you refer to it as "It" which means it isn't a person. And you can't very well talk to a street in the daytime. Too busy, too many people. But at night you can sit in the window and look out and think, just really *think* things. Where you want to go, what you want to do. I lived on a nice street like that in Western Pressing. It's a good poem. It sounds familiar."

It wasn't high praise. But it wasn't disbelief or scorn or even worse, complete misunderstanding. Still, she thought, she didn't want his doughy hands all over it. Then she thought she ought to just remove it carefully and ignore it–pretend it wasn't all that important and perhaps he would forget about it. But when she went to tug it out of his hands he held on firmly and met her eyes for the first time. She noticed his appeared to have small flecks of amber in them, which might have been more interesting poetically if she had noticed it before.

"You realize, of course, that Penham-Wynek won't be here much longer to talk to, if things go on like this." Roger gestured vaguely at the wall in the direction of the fallen house next-door.

She knew what he was doing. He was trying to recruit her, just as he had the first time he had seen her. Trying to pull her in to his odd and alarming concerns, when what she really wanted to do

was ignore them completely and go back to the comfort of her routines. But her eyes roved her small room, still unable to find her parent's gift and note. They moved across all the pieces of the familiar, the accessories of her comfortable and predictable life now shoved aside and callously torn apart. What if it *had* been this house? What if it was to be this house the next time?

"What am I supposed to do about it?"

He looked away for a long time, finally releasing the paper to her. She stuffed it quickly into her pocket.

"Ivy's going to get me into the mines," he said.

"And you want me to help, I suppose."

"I don't know. I'd have to speak to Ivy. But there might be something you could do in the Gasp House," he said.

"Like what?"

"Find something–any little detail about something Esmariah knows."

You told me it would keep digging as long as I paid–

Your way worked in the beginning but I'm down to portrait-frames and knick-knacks–

"Maybe." She frowned. "Maybe there is something. I heard–"

"Is this what you were looking for?" He stooped down to retrieve something that had been lying just at their feet under the spine of a book.

Missing took the small necklace and the note with a sigh of relief. "Yes. Thank you." She pocketed the note alongside her poem.

"You were saying?"

"Never mind." She sighed, fingering her necklace and feeling as if everything was, if not fixed, at least a little better. "I can tell you about it later."

"What is it?" He gestured.

"All I have left of my parents," she answered. "They died when I was a baby."

"I'm sorry," Roger said.

"That's all right. I'm not. Not much anyway. I don't remember it."

Roger helped her move her bed back to its original position, and re-stocked her drawers with underthings, laying them aside as if they were fragile and possibly dangerous. They spent a long time smoothing out the pages of her books and stacking them again.

"Nancifela Drunicus?" Roger said, noting several of the titles. "I like her work, although I always preferred the Hardarien Squires." He grinned.

"Oh, did you read the one where they solved the mystery of the Mage's Lodge together?" Missing asked.

"Yes. I think Yoseph had something for Nancifela, myself."

"I did too. A shame they didn't continue the stories."

And so, with such tentative overtures as might have embarrassed the most weathered conductor, they put Missing's life in order. But the slug of change she had once felt creeping across her life was back, and bigger, and enveloping her in a warm amniotic saliva that she did not like the feeling of at all.

Chapter 5

Aunt Orangia had brewed some tea and found Ivy's bread relatively intact. When Missing and Roger came back downstairs they found Morwin Croomb and her aunt talking quietly at the table, eating bread and cheese. The blue bowl, Aunt Orangia's favorite, lay nearby, still split in two. There was no magic to mend it. It didn't appear the two had really cleaned up much, although Aunt Orangia had regained some of her color and her hand, as she sipped her tea, was steady. Morwin Croomb was speaking to her in a soft voice, his round, weathered face grave but not without a sparkle–something around the eyes–that Missing decided she liked.

"Ah." He looked up. "Just the two I needed to see. I've spoken to the king's secretary about our dilemma."

Roger and Missing sat opposite one another. Roger broke off a generous bit of bread and handed it to Missing.

"He has advised me that the king is unable to take a hand in these matters at present. The king is, apparently, also worried about the tremors, although he believes they are from the tides on the coast. He and his advisors have been locked up for days, going over ways to fortify the quay."

"Now." He held up his hand as Roger's shoulders fell. "The secretary advised me he would take my concerns to the queen instead. This fellow–Ennon's his name–and I both served together in our youth. We were both going to be soldiers. Our paths have diverted somewhat, but he still owes me a bit of money from an old dice game, and promised me he would make certain the queen hears of this."

"Yes, but will she, and can she, do anything about it?" Aunt Orangia said. "One hears so little of the woman. I've never even seen her."

"I asked that question myself." The Inquisitor nodded. "My friend reassured me that the queen is someone to be trusted with the weight of this. She's apparently quite a formidable creature in her own right, but Ennon seems to like her, and I trust his judgment. From the way he spoke of her, I wouldn't be surprised if she were a ten-foot tall, fire-breathing warrioress. He says she takes Manking's immediate concerns very seriously."

"As she should," Aunt Orangia said. "How long before you can speak to her?"

"He didn't say, but after today I imagine it won't take long."

Roger and Missing were trying very hard not to look at one another. Somehow, Missing knew instinctively not to speak of what he had told her about the baker's plans to get him into the mine. Though Croomb and Aunt Orangia seemed supportive, there comes a time in every young person's life when they decide some things must be kept secret from their elders. This was one of those times. They ate their bread and cheese in a guilty silence, feeling the full weight of this decision fall down on them.

"You said you overheard something in the Gasp house that might help." Roger turned to her.

"Oh yes." Missing turned to Croomb. The Inquisitor had his eyebrows raised in polite attention. Very quickly she sketched in the details of her work stripping the rooms, and added the information of the two trips to the Sulk house. She spoke nothing of Titus though. That was another guilty secret.

"Then I heard Bray and the Lady Gasp talking when I went to take in her lunch," she said.

"Cadaberous Bray?" Croomb leaned forward. "He's a bit of a shady character. The whole family's a little off. Always has been. My grandfather told me his grandfather used to talk about the Brays. 'Off,' he said, and that was one of the nicer comments."

Missing nodded. "They were talking about the mines. Esmariah said 'You told me the thing would dig as long as I kept paying.' Then she sent me away to the kitchen."

"What thing?" Croomb immediately wanted to know. Missing noticed that he drummed his fingers on the table when he was intrigued, a swift little staccato of *thrump, thrump, diddley thrump*.

"I don't know. Later I heard her say his way had worked in the beginning, but it wasn't working any more, and she was thinking of hiring some peasants to work the mines for a while."

"Can she afford it?" Aunt Orangia said.

"I don't know. She couldn't afford the five percent deposit Eleganta Sulk wanted her to pay to buy the mines."

"I wonder why Eleganta is toying with all this. She could buy that mine without Esmariah's help," Croomb said.

"It isn't for sale," Roger said. "Not to the Sulks, anyway."

They looked at him.

"Remember, I told you the Sealyhams won't sell to the Sulks. They don't like them. It's possible they might sell to the Gasps though, if they were interested in selling at all."

"And are they?" Morwin Croomb leaned forward even further.

"I couldn't really say." Roger shoved his hair back. It wasn't, perhaps, as annoying a gesture as Missing had originally thought.

"So the Sulks may be interested in acquiring the mine, but Eleganta is aware the Sealyhams won't sell to her." Croomb pursed his lips. "She knows of Esmariah's desperate situation and is stringing her along until the woman will agree to the least possible profit. In return, Eleganta can approach the sale with the Gasp name, rather than the Sulk's. Very clever."

"That's not fair." Missing did not even feel the words before they erupted. Eyes blinked at her.

"Esmariah's pulling her own house apart, and Eleganta knows about it and is just using *her* good name to get what she wants?"

Her aunt actually laughed. "Good name? Missing, Esmariah's name is as sullied as the Sulks. Perhaps even more so. Why the Sealyhams would choose to favor her over the Sulks is a mystery to me."

"They don't like that Eleganta is still alive," Roger said. "She's eons old, and some say she dabbles in magic to keep herself young. They don't like that kind of magic. People shouldn't be allowed to stay around forever. Things have to change."

"That's just her teeth," Missing said. "She bought magic ones when she was young and wanted to stay beautiful. I've seen them. It didn't work though, because she didn't listen to the instructions. Believe me, they aren't keeping her pretty. They just keep her alive."

"You seem to know a lot about the Sealyahms." Croomb turned his attention on Roger.

"Western Pressing is a small place," Roger said. "The Sealyhams just don't handle themselves the same way the Gasps and Sulks do. Most days you'll find them down at the market, or in a pub just like regular folk, talking about the weather or the dogs they raise. Everyone likes their dogs. They can catch a rat quicker than a cat. I wonder what Esmariah is looking for in Western Pressing?" He turned the attention away from himself.

"Whatever it is, it's got something to do with a Sealyham heir," Missing said. Roger gnawed on his lip thoughtfully, but didn't reply.

"If the Gasps are so bad, why did you get me a job there?" Missing turned to her aunt.

"I didn't say they were bad, I just said the name wasn't clean. I got you a job there because, despite her financial woes, Esmariah has influence. You could do worse than work for someone with that kind of influence."

"It still isn't fair." Missing sat back and folded her arms over her chest. Esmariah Gasp might not be a nice person–indeed, Missing had not needed her aunt to tell her there was something circumspect about the woman–but at least she was trying to do things honestly. Or as honestly as a woman like Esmariah Gasp was able. This was more than could be said for Eleganta Sulk. She thought suddenly of Titus and his loathing expression whenever he was in his Gran's presence. She wondered if he might be asked to help, somehow.

"Well, between that mystery and this Black Lotus business I'm going to have my hands full." Croomb sighed. His cheeks puffed out when he did.

"Black Lotus? I met her when I was in prison," Missing said.

The man's fingers became positively possessed. "How?"

"She came in my cell through a tunnel. Wanted me to go with her. She said she was going to hide me in safe houses until she could smuggle me out of the city."

"I'm very glad to hear you did not indulge in that sort of nonsense," Aunt Orangia said.

"The Black Lotus is becoming a huge canker on my a–" Croomb stopped himself. "Assigned duty roster."

"We found that tunnel yesterday, after a pick-pocketing whore disappeared." He grimaced. "I'm referring of course to her profession, not any personal grievances I might have with the woman."

"That's all right, Morwin," Aunt Orangia said. "I'm well aware of what a whore is."

He smiled a little. "I've been after her for months, just couldn't find any charges to stick. Finally got a witness, put her in jail, and the next morning she was gone. They didn't close the tunnel all the way though. It was littered with candy wrappers. They were the ones responsible for all the graffiti here the other day, too. Painted all over the poorer districts while people were away at work. You'd think they had nothing better to do than walk around for eight hours misspelling bad revolutionary propaganda."

Aunt Orangia chuckled. It was not something she did often, and Missing looked at her, wondering if she had dipped into Ivy's remedy a bit.

"It was bad, wasn't it?" Orangia said. "As if they thought we couldn't read. Poor way to start a revolution."

A small, clay bell clanked in Missing's mind. She knew there was something here she should notice–some important detail, something that had come into her line of sight recently. But with everything else on her mind she just couldn't put her finger on it.

Morwin Croomb laughed. "Did I ever tell you about the time I rousted that gang of thieves from the Shunts? Things started disappearing from shops, but only things that were on low shelves."

"We haven't seen one another in thirty-two years, Morwin," Orangia reminded him. "You haven't told me much of anything."

His face sobered for a moment, but not much. He gazed at her, and took a bite of his bread.

"Thirty-two years," he said, chewing. "It doesn't really seem that long, does it?"

Aunt Orangia smiled. Missing was almost certain she had had a nip or two now.

"Indeed. But go on with your story."

"Well, as I said, they were only stealing things off low shelves. We supposed they thought those things would not be noticed. Then we thought it was some strange calling card. Thieves

do that, you know, after a bit of success. Start leaving clues just to taunt us. Turns out they were dwarves and just couldn't reach any higher!" He slapped the table merrily.

For a very long time after that, a time that seemed to pass generously slow, attentive to their need for comfort, Morwin Croomb regaled them with stories of small thieves, incompetent murderers, and inexpert pick-pockets. His stories had them laughing nearly off the bench, and late into the evening they were still picking at Ivy's bread, giggling and roaring and generally managing to ignore the tomorrow that would inevitably come.

* * *

The following day they woke to find the Black Lotus had struck again during the night. Handbills were posted on nearly every doorway, still sticky with cheap glue. The women of Penham-Wynek were out in full force pulling them down, wadding them up, and scrubbing the glue off their doors. Whenever the Black Lotus struck, it always involved somebody having to clean something.

But some of them were reading the postings. A neighbor girl Missing had never much cared for had one in her hand and was slowly mouthing the words, even as her mother admonished her to lend a hand. She did not look happy.

"Here, just read this part Mam. Says here, according to Manking law, once I'm married *he* gets everything. Is that true?"

"What have you got you're so worried about losing–your addled wits?" her mother said.

"He shouldn't just get everything because I'm a woman!"

"Don't worry. I think he'll get *plenty* of you." The woman eyed her sticky door fiercely.

"Says here Mam," her daughter went on, "that if you and Da ever wanted to part company *he* gets everything too, and has the right to throw you out on the street. That's a law."

Her mother stopped. "Give me that." She snatched the paper from her daughter's hand.

"Hmmph. After all I've done for him, and the gambling I put up with, and that *woman* he took up with for a week and me having to go and drag him back home–" she continued to mutter to herself as she took a brush and soap to the door.

That was when the whispering began. It happened behind hands, and in dark corners. It happened in the gathering places–bakeries and dress shops and markets and street corners–all the small temples of working women. Then it began to evolve into a discussion of the way things *had* been, the way they *were*, and the way they *should* be. It developed into dark gazes and cold dinners and reproachful sniffs for formerly content spouses, brothers, lovers, who had no real idea what was going on.

It swirled around Missing as she went to work each day like a small wind and she sensed the change coming. It smelled tinny and sharp and inconvenient.

Over the next two days Manking became a very different place. Five more buildings fell down, though the extent of their damage was not nearly so bad as the complete annihilation of the house next door. Narigol, an old woman Missing had known all her life to be mean and intolerant of children, went to live with her daughter's family. She wept for hours, and even Aunt Orangia couldn't soothe her.

The precisely cobbled streets, under the constant strain of the daily upheaval, cracked and became pocked with holes. In the High District, merchants removed their finer wares from the windows and buried precious vases and other breakables in boxes of straw. The witches of the Shunts did the same with their bottled tinctures, worrying over them breaking and the contents becoming mixed. Many who walked through the Shunts now walked carefully, to avoid causing the

slightest jolt that might have them all up in smoke.

The work of the Black Lotus contributed to a certain degradation as well. The city of Manking, with its stability threatened in more than one way, became a quiet place of flaring ill-tempers. The machinations of everyday life slowed to a crawl, especially around dinnertime when people rushed home and then paced around outside, terribly indecisive as to whether or not they should go in their homes and try to protect their belongings, or stay outside and avoid being crushed by falling beams or entire upstairs bedrooms.

So far the Gasp house stood firm, possibly held together by the added cohesive of the yellow lichen. Missing did not see Esmariah nor Cadaberous Bray during those two days. She and Utter went about the daily routine of cleaning and fixing things, raking the drive and speaking little to one another. Roger was hardly ever seen. He rose early and came late for dinner, covered in flour. Aunt Orangia admired his dedication to his job. Missing knew better. Though he had not again spoken to her of his plans, his covert glances told her something was in the works.

It was on the third day after the large tremor that she discovered something in the Gasp house. Utter sent her to the right wing of the house to clean and look for anything that had fallen off shelves. Most of the wing was unused, and in it lay the seventeen remaining rooms that would later be pilfered. One of these rooms was a library.

Missing gasped when she opened the door. Books in Manking were not hard to come by, but those were the types of books whose spines were bound with string, or merely folded over. Her books were ragged and spotty from being read and re-read, their cheap paper unable to withstand too much handling.

Esmariah's library was full of real books. They ran up and down the shelved walls like marvelous leather-bound bricks in the walls of some literary shelter. A few smaller ones had fallen out, but the majority of the larger ones sat firmly on their shelves, declaring that no little tremors were going to disrupt their quiet musings and those smaller ones that had fallen were obviously of a lesser breed.

These were books that knew things. They were books that had not been inked over badly set type but rather lovingly printed out by patient hands. Their binders brought them to life with a perfect concoction of glue and gold leaf and there they sat, ponderous as old sages, waiting to be sought out by the unknowing.

They were mostly about salt.

Missing wandered here and there, her dusting rag dangling, forgotten in her hand. Her fingers had begun to itch, yet for some reason she could not bring herself to touch them. They were too precious for her coarse hands. The ones written in other languages intimidated her, while the others just seemed to be stern–demanding caution and a certain reverence. Here were the thoughts and ideas of people who were being read, they seemed to say. Not big, lumpy girls who hide little poems under their beds.

In the center of the long room was a broad oak table. Its surface could barely be seen under the books littering it, their pages flung open like gulls come to rest on a shore. In the middle of this was a large sheet of paper. Someone's careful, acerbic script covered the paper, and Missing leaned over it curiously.

It was a massive genealogy. Across the top was the name of the founding family of Manking: Sealyham. From that dove the names of the three sisters, two of whom had married outside the family to form the three pillars of Making society. Renna Gasp. Mabis Sealyham. Eleganta Sulk–there was a reproachful blot of ink next to it, as if the hand that printed it had inadvertently put more force than necessary on the tip of the quill.

From them extended the branches of a wildly tangled vine of history, branches that wandered in and out of one another, leaves of names sprouting up, flowering, then withering away. In places the script was so tiny she could barely read it. Her eyes wandered here and there, looking for some link, some common thread. It did not take long to find the names *Titus* and *Prudity Grumm* near the bottom of the Sulk lineage, separated by a splitting branch of two fathers--both deceased--as was the mother, Hieronyma Sulk. Near the bottom of the Sealyham branch were the names of the last two in that family, Lenore and Richard Sealyham. There was a small shoot underneath their names indicating a continuing lineage, and the words *heir unknown?*

Esmariah's was the last name under the Gasp tree. But another line stretched below hers, between the Gasp lineage and that of the Sealyhams. It appeared to come out of a wild snarl of names and was too confusing for Missing to see where it began. Yet her eye caught on the name *Task* somewhere among this jumble and yes, under that was her aunt's name, as well as an off-shoot for a sister, *name unknown, deceased*. *Spouse deceased–Sealyham?* joined with that branch, and flowered below at the very bottom of the list. The last line below Esmariah's–bastardized by missing information, distanced by marriage after marriage, stuck in the tree only by chance–said simply, *missing*.

The world tilted and fell away, yet with an admirable force of will Missing picked up a quill and nearby bottle of ink. There was no paper apparent, so without thinking twice, she found a page in a book with a space at the bottom and quickly copied out as many of the vines that seemed relevant, tore it out, and tucked it into her pocket. Her fingers felt two other bits of paper there she had forgotten about–the poem and her parent's note.

She stumbled from the room in a daze and went home early. No one noticed. The streets were nearly bare as she walked along and she was so immersed in her own thoughts she almost bumped into Titus, hurrying up the road to the Gasp House.

"Missing?"

She stopped, turned, and was for some reason momentarily annoyed. But the sight of his face calmed her, and when he stepped closer her heart began a light pit-patter almost as painful in its yearning as it was pleasurable.

"You're out and about early. Do you have another message for me?" He grinned. Before she could move he had stuck his hand in her pocket and gathered up the scraps of paper.

"No!" She snatched at her papers quickly, managing to regain everything but her poem.

One of his eyebrows rose up. He turned his back on her quickly so that she could not get at what he held, unfolded it, and read. Missing felt the heat of a raging blush and stood by, fidgeting.

Titus laughed.

"What a quaint little rhyme," he said. Then he handed the poem back to her.

The world, which had lingered only on the edge of her vision since being in the library, thundered back in with a rush. She blinked.

"I wrote that," she said.

"Did you? I imagine my sister might like it. She likes that sort of thing."

Missing thought of the girl and her giggling cohorts. The poor chicken under the couch came to mind, hiding out from being puttered, only to be used in the stewpot later on.

"I have to go," she said. There was an odd sting in the corner of her eye; she wiped fiercely at what must have been a bit of dirt.

Titus' face fell. "Have I upset you?"

"No," she said, because the *yes* was too shy.

"I'm sorry," he said. He turned to match her hurried steps. "I'm no judge of literature you know. You shouldn't listen to a word I say."

Missing stopped. Looked at him. Found some nugget of courage deep within and drew it out.

"But I like to talk with you, Titus," she said. "And I don't mind what you said about the poem. Not much, anyway."

He smiled. "Oh. That's all right then. I'd like for us to be friends, Missing. Other people are very dull. I need someone I can talk to. Someone I feel like I can trust. I can trust you, can't I?"

It was exactly what she wanted him to ask. "Yes," she said.

"Good. Then tell me what you did today in Esmariah's house. More pillaging?"

"No. Today I dusted the library." Voicing this reminded her of her more immediate concerns. "I'm sorry Titus, I'm in a hurry. I've got to see my aunt. Can we talk again tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow?" He paused, forcing her to slow. "I'm very busy tomorrow. But I suppose I could come and see you after work."

"That would be fine." She nodded.

He leaned forward and took hold of her wrist just above her hand. "Tomorrow at the gate then," he whispered in her ear. The heat of his breath tickled her neck. Then he was gone, hurrying down a side street.

Missing inhaled slowly, waiting for her heart to settle down a bit before continuing on.

She was waiting for her aunt when the woman returned home later. She sat at the kitchen table with the stolen bit of genealogy and her parents' note in front of her. She had no idea how long she had been sitting there, staring, turning things over in her mind. She hadn't even noticed the daily tremor, except to note that a few cups fell off the sideboard.

"Missing–what in the world?" Her aunt demanded.

"What was my mother like?"

How had she never asked this before? There was a vague recollection of childish questions asked through yawns before bed, questions answered by the firm declaration that wondering over such things was useless. Since then she had not thought about them much. Like most children, when she was safe and warm and whole, the things she was missing didn't seem very important.

But right now even safety and comfort couldn't deter simple human curiosity. Missing had never had cause to wish for a different life. As far as she was concerned this was the best one there was. Yet there was often a lingering sense that she was somehow alone in the world, though she had an entire city full of people to call her own. Just now it seemed very important to draw a connection to her origins.

"I barely even remember her name. N–Nepetra?" Missing dug in the vault of her memory. Her aunt nodded.

"And what about my father?"

"His name was Aster."

"How well did you know him?"

Aunt Orangia shrugged. "I didn't know him at all. Your mother and I were not very close as children. I found her flighty and decadent. She liked small dogs, which I've never seen a use for, and dressed them up in ribbons well beyond the age that girls can be tolerated to do such things. She left Manking very young to seek out a career in millinery to the west. It never really panned out, mostly because she didn't like all the work involved with working. She met your father, fell in love, and had you. By that time their finances were failing and they wrote to me to ask about work in Manking. I invited them to come and stay for a while, until they got their feet under them. It was my charitable duty."

"And then?"

"There was an incident outside Manking. The soldiers who brought you to me mentioned

something about a run-away wagon. Why? What's brought all this up suddenly?"

"Do you think they loved me, Aunt Orangia?"

Her aunt gazed at her. She opened her mouth as if to say one thing, then paused. "As much as they were able to, I'm sure," she said.

"I found this in Esmariah's library." Missing slid the pilfered page over to her.

"Oh, Missing. You've damaged one of Esmariah's belongings? She'll have you out on the street." Her aunt sighed.

"But look at it, Aunt Orangia. It's part of a genealogy. She had a whole map of people from generations back."

Her aunt looked at the page. Then she held it up to see better. She looked at it for a very long time.

"I see," she said finally. "What would you like me to say, Missing? That I believe, as Esmariah seems to, that your father was some missing heir to the Sealyham name?"

"Well?"

"Well, I don't. Think of all the names you saw on that list, even all the ones you have written down here. Sealyham might hold some great meaning to us here in Manking, but not so much in other places. Consider what Roger has told us about the behavior of the Sealyhams in Western Pressing. Mixing with common folk, sitting in pubs. Does this sound like the behavior of a family concerned with maintaining its lineage?"

Missing had to shake her head.

"And if there was a bastard child or two, whose mother gave them the Sealyham name in the hopes of gaining some money from the family, do you think they would seriously have any cause to be worried?" Her aunt's voice was brittle.

"I would imagine there are little Sealyhams running all over that city, possibly even in small places like Delasbourg where your father came from. *And.*" She paused to draw in a breath. "The Sealyhams did not originally come from Manking any more than the Gasps or Sulks did. Why, there might be *hundreds* of relatives with the various names, passing them on hand over hand. Even my name is on that list, as you've been so careful to point out. Do you see that it has made *my* life any better?"

"No, Aunt Orangia," Missing whispered. Her aunt was not usually so long-winded. She preferred her admonitions to be short and to the point, trusting in brevity and tone to get the point across.

"I don't know what Esmariah is up to with this genealogy. And I don't know what she's looking for in Western Pressing. But I can assure you, Missing, it isn't going to be anything about *you*. Now. Have we finished with this nonsense?"

"Yes, Aunt Orangia."

"Good. Let us begin dinner then." Orangia wadded up the page of history and used it as tinder to light the cooking fire.

Chapter 6

Missing's sleep was troubled that night, and a long time coming. Really, she admonished herself. What had she expected? The idea that Esmariah Gasp included her in an extensive family genealogy meant nothing more than that the woman was involved in some project for curiosity's sake. Perhaps some great work of historical significance she wished to leave behind as her contribution to the city of Manking. But it seemed obvious she was looking for some sort of Sealyham heir. And if she wanted Sealyham heirs, there was one unknown on the list that was certainly closer than Missing. The more she thought about it, the more it made sense that *that* was the Sealyham Esmariah had sent her spy to Western Pressing to find.

She only managed an hour or so of sleep when Roger woke her, nudging her shoulder gently. Missing sat up quickly, starting a little at the strange, watery effect the green-glass windows and moonlight had on his features.

"It's only me. The door wasn't locked. Ivy says to have you come."

Shaking off her fatigue, Missing dressed quickly and joined him downstairs where he was rummaging in the kitchen for a quick snack. They managed to make it to the door and out into the street without disturbing her aunt.

Manking in moonlight was a silent cairn of stone and blind windows. Their footsteps on the cobbles seemed enormously loud. She followed Roger to the Shunts. This street was just as quiet, but not as deserted. Cloaked figures moved up and down it, whispering along on feather-light feet. Missing had never been in the Shunts at night. There were still vendors set up, but they were a very different type of vendor than she was used to seeing there. Strange, sparkling things hummed on their tables, or sloshed quietly in jars, or bristled with momentary hairs of pale luminescence. She could not make out what they were and searched the faces of the merchants curiously. But there was no one there she recognized. Some of them, however, greeted the two in whispers as they passed.

"'Lo Roger. Fine dark out, isn't it?"

"Hello, Mister Tavakian. Yes it is."

"Evening Roger. Tell Ivy I've found some of that bellebar she needed for one of her recipes, won't you? Have her stop by."

"I will, Mistress Haversand."

"I never knew they sold so many things at night here," Missing said. "I thought it was just the shops that stayed open."

"Mmm. Well, these are things that really *can't* be sold during the day," Roger said. "They have a very specific clientele."

"What sort of things?" She tried to slow long enough to eye what looked to be a large snarl of copper wire on a table. It appeared harmless, then began to vibrate a little when she stepped closer.

"Oh, magical things. Dimensional astrolabes and thaumic registers and weather spells and toothbrushes. That sort of thing."

It didn't take them long to reach Ivy's, and they found the baker waiting for them. She was dressed in a long cloak with the cowl thrown back. Her red hair spilled down over her shoulders, gleaming. Missing had never noticed that the woman was quite tall, almost as tall as she. And rather round as well. She had always hidden it behind her scarves. Tonight she wore a dark gown of black

silk that fit her snugly. A large portion of fabric was missing up around the chest, but Ivy didn't seem the least bit concerned with where it had gone. It certainly drew attention to some of her softer features. She handed them two lanterns, then took up one for herself.

"Ready?"

They nodded, and she led them out into the night. "We're going to take the shortcut," she said, motioning to a nearby alley entrance set between two vendor's stalls. One was selling mirrors. The other was selling nuts of various sizes and shapes, polishing them attentively while waiting for customers.

Ivy led them down the alley. For a moment, Missing thought it was the same one she followed Titus down, but did not see the door to the gambling house anywhere. The doorways here seemed vague somehow, perhaps shielded by the dark. But while she could see them clearly when she looked straight at them, Missing found she could not quite make them out when they moved–as if they became washed out or blurred by a speed she could never have accomplished on foot.

"Is this the alley that goes to the seventh intersection on the north loop?" Roger asked.

"Not quite. This one leads to the fourth right-hand turn. From there you can get to the seventh intersection."

Missing followed behind, completely perplexed. "What does that mean? What street are we on?"

"We're not," Ivy said. "Not on any Manking street anyway. There were certain pathways here long before Manking ever rose up from the mud and sheep dung. We're following one of those. Now remember Roger, the paths up here will directly mirror the mines. So mind what I've taught you and don't get lost."

Roger nodded.

"How could they be the same up here as down below?" Missing said.

"The paths don't actually end where the ground is," Roger said. "That is to say, the ground only sort of splits them in half, top and bottom. It's the same path, underground or not."

"I don't understand that."

He flashed a grin. "Neither do I, really. Not yet."

"They built the streets of Manking directly over the original paths. They couldn't help themselves," Ivy murmured absently. "Here it is."

She led them abruptly around a corner. Missing was surprised to find they had traveled all the way to the north end of the city, further even than the Gasp house, in a shorter time than it took her to walk to work every morning. There was a lantern on the corner, guttering with new flame. Ivy turned and raised her hand to a tall shadow standing next to it, concealed within dark robes. The figure raised its hand, up near the shoulder. Then Missing saw another hand shoot upward, from somewhere near its knee. As she watched, the top half of the figure fell backward, as if it had been snapped in two. Missing's stomach lurched. Suddenly two small figures stood side-by-side. Relieved, she realized the figure had been two small people, one standing on the shoulders of the other to reach the lantern. They scurried away into the shadows without a sound.

"The Glimmer Men," Ivy said, continuing on. "They light the candles to show us the way. No one knows the Shunts–top or bottom–like the Glimmer Men."

Missing looked down from the top of the hill to see the Gasp property lying beneath them just on the cusp of the city, a bulging behemoth frozen in restless slumber. A fire was lit in one of the rooms, and she saw a figure pass in front of the window for a moment, then disappear. Esmariah Gasp, it seemed, shared the insomnia of her estate. From here they were only a mile or so from the shore, and in front of them lay the entrance to the Gasp mine.

It was a walled yard about the size of her street. Unlike the Gasp house, the Gasp mine was secured by a locked gate. A small shack to one side indicated it also had a guard. Indeed, as they watched, a man came out and sat down on the front stoop to smoke his pipe, keeping an eye on the gates. The yard inside was strewn with unused wagons hibernating like behemoths, useless with no salt to transport. The mine entrance lay some distance away, a long, wide downward sloping trail that burrowed into the earth, big enough for the wagons to come in and out of.

"There's no trouble with the lock," Ivy said. She was removing her cloak. "As for the guard, I can give you about an hour."

"What are you going to do?" Missing whispered.

"Enchant him, dear. I didn't get all dressed up for nothing. As soon as his attention is diverted, you two slip in. Don't light your lanterns until you're well underground."

They both nodded, then watched as Ivy approached the gates. She swayed a bit when she walked, or rather her lower half did. It was a sway that had the potential for knocking over furniture.

"Why Morgan Ellender!" she cried out as she approached the gates. "I never! It's been nearly three years!"

The guard looked up to see the woman emerge from the shadows. Her swaying must have concerned him because Ellender's mouth fell open, his pipe fell out, and cinders flew where it landed on the ground. Missing wondered what her aunt would say if she were to abbreviate several of her shirts a bit.

"Ivy," he said. "Yes, three years. I'm married now," he added.

"Really?" She edged up closer to the bars. "How unfortunate. Do you know, I have the most beastly insomnia tonight Morgan? I've been walking around all night. You always had the best remedies for sleeplessness, if I remember. Invite me in so I can rest my feet."

Ellender rose like a man in a trance and went to the gate. "I'm sort of on duty here, Ivy. And I'm married now. Did I mention being married?"

Ivy lay her head back and gave voice to one of the most charming, most dangerous little giggles Missing had ever heard. Morgan Ellender, lost from the first swish, opened the gate and invited Ivy into the guardhouse for tea. When she took hold of his arm he completely forgot about the lock.

She and Roger crept past the gate slowly, making as little sound as possible. They kept to the shadows of the sleeping wagons and were soon into the mine, which was so dark it was almost like passing through a veil. They walked side-by-side for a moment or two, holding their hands out and praying they would not bump into anything. The hair crawled on the back of Missing's neck as if something were breathing on her. Her muscles felt like iron bars under her skin, taut and heavy. Finally Roger stopped.

"I think that's far enough," he whispered. The sound seemed to come from all around her.

"I don't have any tinder for the lamp," Missing said.

"Oh, that's all right. I can do it."

Missing waited for the scrape of flint, but Roger seemed to be standing very still. Suddenly there was a small pop, and a crackle, and a bit of flame leapt up in his lantern.

"How did you do that?"

"Oh, something Ivy taught me. It isn't as hard as you'd think, actually. In fact, it's so easy, it's what started the fire that day. I miscalculated a bit."

There was another pop, and a flame appeared in her lantern as well. Missing stared at Roger's face by firelight, all golden angles and scrape of dark hair.

"I've never known anyone who could make fire before," she said. "You know, when I first met

you, I didn't really believe you were a wizard."

"That's all right, I didn't really believe it myself," he said. Then he began to lead the way further into the mines. "I mean I've *wanted* to be one since I was small. And my parents always thought I had some talent and encouraged me, but until I met Ivy, I never really had the right tools."

The slope leveled out a bit as they walked. The tunnel was enormous and wide, held up by beams at least as thick as her waist. But she did not really see any indication of salt, though she wasn't sure she would know what it looked like underground.

"It must be nice to have a talent like that," Missing said. "I wish I had one."

"But you have your writing," Roger said. "That's much harder than fire. I can hardly put two sentences together on paper."

Missing thought about it for a moment. "It always seemed very easy to me."

They went along for some time, their lanterns illuminating a space around them like a pocket of their own time. Finally it emptied out into a room. When they entered, they both gasped.

They had found the salt.

It wasn't difficult to identify it. Though not as fine as they knew it from shakers, it was still as white and gleaming. The cavern they stumbled into was a massive cathedral of glittering pillars of salt that erupted from the floor and splashed across the ceiling, frozen in crystalline. The bare light of their lanterns was mirrored back at them a thousand times, in each tiny facet of each crystal. There was very little salt on the floor, however, and the walls were similarly bare except for the occasionally weak, milky strain.

"But there's plenty of salt here!" Missing said.

"No," said Roger. "You can't take the salt from the pillars. See how they've been whittled down to a certain size? If they get too thin, they won't hold up the mine anymore."

He cast his lantern about, finding the far wall. Several dozen tunnels ran in and out of it, leading to darker places beyond.

"Those must be additional tunnels they've been mining, looking for another deposit like the one that must have once been in here," he said. Missing followed him over.

"How do you know so much about salt?" she asked.

"My father told me some things. It's a hobby of his," he said. He was eyeing the entrance to one of the tunnels. "You know, these don't look like they've been worked with picks."

"How else could they have been dug?"

He pursed his lips. "I don't know."

Missing heard a slight sound behind them and tugged at his sleeve, her heart pounding. "Someone's coming."

Instantly the lanterns went out, and Roger yanked her into one of the tunnels. They stood huddled very close together, and Missing was aware of his elbow poking into her side a bit.

"You can put out fire, too?"

Roger nodded.

They waited for what seemed a small eternity, until they saw the bobbing of lantern-light approaching from the original corridor. It moved into the cavern, and the salt pillars caught it up greedily and tossed it around.

From the entrance, and as far as Missing knew the only exit, emerged a figure that was long and tall, wearing a tattered great-coat, his head swaying between his strange, stilted shoulder blades.

"*Bray*." The sound escaped before she could stop it. Roger grabbed her wrist to steady her.

Cadaberous Bray held up his lantern and swung it around from tunnel to tunnel. He moved to the center of the room and laid his hand on one of the pillars. Then he leaned against it heavily, his

bright eyes suddenly weary. He wiped a bony hand over his forehead, then stood erect again.

"Where are you?" he called out suddenly.

Missing and Roger froze.

"Where are you?" he repeated. "Oh, please come back."

Roger and Missing relaxed a little with the realization he was not talking to them.

"*Please*," his voice caught in his throat. "There isn't enough salt. I don't understand. Haven't we provided what you wanted?"

He stood still, listening to his own calls echo back at him. *Please…haven't we…*Then he became agitated and lurched down a tunnel, his coat hem slapping against his legs like some struggling bird.

Missing was out of the tunnel even before Roger was, drawn after Bray's fading light. She heard Roger hurrying along behind her. As long as she kept Bray's light in sight, they could see enough to walk while remaining in relative shadows of their own. Though what they would do if he turned and came back she did not know. Nor did she care just then. She was more concerned with what Bray was doing in the mines.

They followed him for a long time, twisting and turning down dark corridors, forced to slow when he went around a corner and they lost his light, then speeding up again when they could. The tunnels they ran through were almost smooth, and nearly round; certainly not the work of miners.

"The north loop to the second junction, then to the left curve–" Roger was mumbling as they ran.

"Roger, be *quiet*," Missing said.

"Do you want to be able to get out again? I'm the one who has to remember which way we've gone."

Finally they saw Bray slow, and his lantern light fell away, literally. Missing crept forward carefully and nearly stumbled over the drop. There were wide stone steps leading down into another cavern. This one was not filled with salt, however. But it was filled with the smell of salt *water*. It was not as large as the outer cavern, and it was craggy and littered with rocks, some as large as wagons. It appeared to have been naturally formed in some time long past, and dripped with chill condensation. They climbed down the steps and hid behind a large boulder nearby, watching Bray as he approached the edge of a large pond in the center.

"An underground cove." Roger twitched with excitement. "It must lead out to the sea. I wonder how long you'd have to hold your breath?"

Missing was more concerned with watching Bray. The lanky man stood on the shore of the slightly shifting pool of seawater and lifted his lantern. He searched the gloamy depths forlornly.

"Come back," he said again. "She needs you." Then, shaking his head as if at his own foolishness, he came back to the stairs, stepped up them, passed dangerously near their hiding place, and was gone.

Roger and Missing stayed huddled together for a moment, unable to believe their luck. Then, when they could breathe again, they sat up and Roger lit their lanterns. Without a word the two moved down to the edge of the pond. Roger seemed interested in the water, but Missing was looking at the far wall.

"I wonder if the water here rises up to the same level as it does outside," Roger said. He searched around a moment until he found a large stone that rose to a point at one end. Then he waded into the water until he found a depth at which the rock just barely poked up above the surface, and wedged it into the mud tightly.

"What's that for?"

"I'm not really sure, yet." He frowned.

Missing made her way around the water's edge to the far wall and the tunnel. She stepped inward and followed it a few paces until she heard a slow sloshing. She ran back.

"There's another tunnel back here. And another cove like this one, I'll bet. I can hear the water."

"There might be dozens of them all over the coast," Roger said. "This is how the sea is going to flood the mines. See? It's already done it before. Maybe that's what made the tunnels. Water would make round tunnels like that, don't you think?" He pointed to the walls, striped with the briny watermarks of past floodings.

"What was Bray doing here?" Missing wondered.

"I don't know," Roger said. "But we'd better go back. It's been at least an hour already."

"We can't go back now. We don't even know what Bray was looking for."

"Whatever it was, he couldn't find it, so we probably won't be able to either," Roger said, and Missing nodded at the sense of it. They made their way back to the tunnel, and she listened quietly as Roger recited their mysterious path. It did not occur to her, until they reached the salt cavern, that if he had forgotten even one detail they might have been lost there for a very long time.

"Wait," she said, as they reached the exit. The smell of fresh air, mixed with the seepage of the deeper mines, stopped her.

"What is it?"

She stepped back a little, just out of the wisp of fresh air and breathed deeply. There it was. The smell. The scent that must be wafting up through the cobbled roads of Manking each day, getting caught in the folds of the clothing of those who bathed in it without knowing.

"We know how deeply some things run," she murmured.

"What do you mean?"

"I–you wouldn't understand. It's about deep things. It's about Manking having been here, before there ever was a Manking, I think. I don't know. I think Esmariah might, and maybe my aunt although she'd never understand if I tried to explain it, and anyway, it's a little silly. Bray mentioned it to me the other day."

Roger stepped back to join her and took a deep breath, holding it in for a few seconds before exhaling.

"Oh yes," he said. "That's the smell of the Shunts. I didn't know you could smell it, too. Well, it would be deep, wouldn't it? Ivy says it's the old paths. The ones the sheep used to follow. The one the sheepherders followed. The ones the animals walked on, when there used to be wild animals here. The old lines that draw us to water and food, and to the night places where wolves howl at the moon."

His voice had deepened, and Missing turned with the sudden urge just to watch his lips move with the words. They came out of his mouth as if spoken somewhere else, only replayed in his consciousness by some far-off musician.

"Ivy calls them Bone Threads. She says–" he frowned a little. "She says some people are attached to them, like… like puppets, or something. Pulled around by them, anchored to er, the *knowing* of them."

Missing shivered. "That sounds horrible."

He blinked at her. "No, no. It isn't. Because other people, who haven't got the Bone Threads, they're just floating here. They have no tie to anything. They just wander, they're always lost, and they know it somehow, deep inside. So they try to take it from others, try to steal it away or win it or seduce it because they're empty inside, and they *feel* it even if they don't know what they're feeling and–dammit. It makes a lot more sense when Ivy explains it."

"It makes sense to me," she said, and it did. Somewhere, in the jumbled explanation, she understood exactly what it meant to be tied to things that ran deep. She had never known what it was. Now she did. And though it seemed like it should have been the type of small epiphany that set off sparks and drums and choirs singing, nothing happened. She and Roger just stared at one another for a moment. Then, with some unspoken signal, they turned and exited the mine.

They found Ivy waiting impatiently by the gate. "Where have you been? I had to put Ellender to sleep you were gone so long. And some other fellow went in and came out too. What happened?"

"It was Cadaberous Bray, Esmariah's solicitor," Missing said. "He didn't see us."

"There's an underground cove down there, with seawater in it," Roger said. "Bray was looking for something there."

"His good looks, perhaps?" Ivy shuddered. "I should have recognized him. That entire family has always been odd. Well, come along. Roger can tell me all about it. Right now we've got to get you back into the house before your aunt finds out you're missing."

"But we're not missing. We've been found," Missing murmured absently, puzzling over their strange encounter and not really paying attention to what came out of her mouth.

"I'm more worried about being found *out* just now. Come along." Ivy hustled them down the street and into an alley toward home.

"My aunt was sound asleep when we left," Missing said. "She'll never know we were gone."

"Oh, Missing. Don't you know your aunt wakes up to check on you at least once a night?" Ivy said.

Missing stared at her. The baker chuckled.

"She's been doing that since you came to her doorstep. It's what they do, people who care for children. Wake up and look at them at night." She shrugged. "I don't know why, but every mother does. She came to me for a remedy for it once. Afraid she was missing out on her rest. I told her she was going to miss out on a lot more than that, having a baby around."

They returned to the house on Penham-Wynek Lane without incident and found it still. Ivy drifted away to the Shunts with Roger at her heels, already speaking in a low voice. Missing climbed the stairs and slipped back into her bed. An hour later, still unable to sleep for all the questions swirling in her head, she heard her door open just the slightest bit and felt rather than saw her aunt's gaze on her for a moment, before the door closed again.

* * *

Missing was a creature of habit. She liked her books stacked just so, she liked to keep her cloak on a hook by the front door, she liked to eat at a certain time and rise at a certain time and do everything in its allotted time. Routine made her feel safe. Predictability left very little room for surprises or discomfort. It made for a simple life which did not require much thought.

Pondering was not in her nature, and never had been. Oh, she mused over words and writing enough, taking care with vowels and consonants and the way they lay on the page. She studied everything she wrote with the careful examination of a chess master, eyeing the pieces and re-aligning her defenses with careful scratch-outs and arrows and precise little notes to remind her of something she meant to say.

She did not think about life much. Up until that year, she had not really been involved in it to any great degree. Her coming out and the lack of marital prospects did not upset her because in some ways she had expected it. The people around her, while never intentionally cruel, had never found it necessary to be overly kind, either. She was "Orangia's lass," with the expressive gesture of

excessively round places. "That quiet one. You know, the orphan, poor thing. And she a large girl too. Make some smith a good wife."

Up until now it had not bothered her. She was able to appreciate the aesthetic value of a smoldering masculine gaze or firm chin just as much as any girl. Because those smoldering gazes and firm chins slipped over her to land on fair hair and pointy shoulders and slender wrists, she had all the more freedom to openly gaze at them. And she wasn't jealous at all. Not really, anyway. Not much, mostly. Yet the next morning she found herself standing in front of the chipped mirror on her dresser arguing with the collar of her shirt.

Ivy's unveiling the night before made her think. There was not so much difference in their sizes and shapes. Missing had always viewed Ivy as sort of pleasantly plump, unhampered by any apparent desire to be desirable to anyone else. She came and went in her scarves and blousy shirts, her hair massed up under a kerchief, her face always fresh scrubbed. But last night the baker had come out from behind that curtain of anonymity, round and soft and completely different. Not pretty, for Ivy's nature made it clear she had no patience for such nonsense. And not quite beautiful either. But there was something about her–the sway, the cut of the dress, the unleashing of hair–that the guard had been unable to resist. As she stood glaring at herself, Missing pondered it carefully, and after five minutes or so came to a realization.

The guard had been unable to resist, because Ivy did not consider that he might. She had not, with either her wiles or her ways, given any indication of doubt. She had assumed on his behalf that he would be taken in, and so he was. Because Ivy wanted him to open the gate, she gave him a good reason to do so. She had a goal, and a plan, and she had implemented them without a thought to the man's moral demise, nor his protestations.

Missing stood, and looked, and thought. Then she set her mind on a goal. She dug in the bottom of her drawers for some tools, and went about implementing her plan. Some of these tools had not seen the light of day in a year, since the coming out. But they would work just fine.

Roger and her aunt were in the kitchen by the time she arrived, making breakfast. Roger, turned toward the hearth and a bubbling pot of porridge, heard her approach.

"Should I put sugar in for you, Missing? Your aunt and I both like it, but I don't know about you ur, um." He stopped completely as he turned. His mouth opened and closed.

"I don't care." She ignored him. "Aunt Orangia, may I take the lace off the collars of my other shirts, like this one?" She stood before her aunt, already armed for rebuke with a thousand arguments.

Her aunt pursed her lips. Her cool eyes took in the sight of her niece. "You've braided your hair," she said.

Missing nodded.

"I see you've already ripped the lace out of that one to illustrate what you have in mind," her aunt said.

Missing nodded again.

"That was a very expensive piece of fabric."

"Most of it's still there," Missing said.

Her aunt's eyebrow leapt up. "If that were true it would still be *mostly* covering you."

"Ur," said Roger, and dropped the ladle he had been holding. He blushed, picked it up, and went back to stirring the porridge.

"Ivy wears her blouses like this," Missing said.

"Ivy is a grown woman."

"So am I, nearly."

"Yes. And when you bend over, most people will be able to see that for themselves," her aunt said.

The two women stared at one another for a moment. Roger was still stirring, a bit faster than was necessary.

"I suppose," Aunt Orangia said, "that you are old enough to decide just how you want to dress now."

Missing sighed with relief.

"And if you want people to mistake you as one of the women on the corner of Marbelous and Weyne, that's your business."

"Oh, Aunt *Orangia*." Missing rolled her eyes. "It's just a little lace. It hardly makes me look like a Marbelous whore."

Her aunt held up her hand. "I didn't say that. I believe those women have changed their job title to 'Nocturnal Companions' anyway. But you don't have to take my word for it. Why don't we ask young Roger?" She turned to the boy.

"Porridge ready now!" Roger announced brightly, turning. Then he fumbled the pot and spilled most of it on the floor. What with the cleaning up and rush to work then, there was no time to get Roger's opinion on the matter.

It was amazing what a little lace, or lack of, could do. On the way to work, Missing both felt and saw eyes on her, and she pushed her shoulders back a little. She dragged the rake up the drive, practicing her sway. She was so enthusiastic about it she stumbled over her own toes. After picking herself up and glancing around to see if anyone had noticed, she continued on, putting a little less thrust into it this time. By the time she got to the door, she felt she had a rather nice little flounce happening.

Utter and Esmariah were not immediately in evidence, but scuffling from up above alerted Missing to where they might be. Last night's discoveries came back to her suddenly, and her stomach dropped. She abandoned her fashion sensibility to dash up the stairs and arrived at the door of the library, panting and disheveled, only to let out a horrified cry.

"Oh no. Don't, please!"

Utter Riley was on a ladder at the far end of the room. As Missing entered he grabbed another handful of books and dropped them. They thumped on the lush rug like meaningless stones, jostling one another and falling open with the sound of cracking spines. Esmariah Gasp sat at the long table in the center, devoid of its genealogy. She had a small, glistening blade in her hand, and was using it to carve off the gold leaf inscriptions of *Properties of Salt*, *The History of Trade Routes in Foreign Lands*, and *Byron Burger's Humorous Poems for the Young*. There was a small snarl of gold filings near her elbow.

"Please don't," Missing said. "Not your beautiful books."

Esmariah stared at her, the knife suspended over the rich leather flesh of Burger's Poems. For one moment a brief wince flashed across her features.

"I find it unseemly, young miss, that you concern yourself so with my affairs," she said. "You are a servant here."

Missing shrank back a little, chagrined with her own presumption. But she found herself suddenly unable to merely stand there, watching the books being carved upon, and not say something. The old sages themselves seemed to cry out to her.

"It isn't worth it," she said. "The Sealyhams will never sell their mine to the Sulks, and Eleganta knows it. She's just stringing you along, so you'll agree to getting nothing for the mine, but then she can put *your* name on the bargain."

"What business is it of yours?" Esmariah asked. Utter had turned on the ladder to watch.

"It isn't, really," Missing said. "Only maybe it is. My neighbor's house fell down the other day. It might have been mine. And my aunt's favorite bowl got broken, the one her mother gave her and–" She had to stop for a breath.

"And you keep sending gold to Bray, only it isn't doing any good and he *knows* it," she rushed on, then stopped, clamping her teeth together so abruptly she bit the tip of her tongue.

"What–did–you–just–*say*."

Missing cringed. Her voice would only come out in a whisper. "Bray was down in the mines last night, looking for something he couldn't find," she said.

Esmariah still had the small knife in her hand. She turned it over absently between her fingers, her face unmoving. Utter began climbing down the ladder.

"How do you know that?"

"I–" Missing took a deep breath. "I can't tell you. But it's true."

"I *told* you," Utter said. "I *told* you he's no good. Been cheating you all along, I said."

"*Be quiet!*" Esmariah thundered, rising from her chair. Utter folded his arms up over his chest and glared.

The Lady Gasp began to pace the room, moving amidst the rubble of books like a small barge through ice floes.

"How do you know about this?" She turned to glare at Missing.

"A–a friend of mine has been looking into it," she said. She edged closer to the door, ready to run when she was dismissed.

"That *boy*," the woman hissed. She came around the end of the table, catching Missing in the snare of her narrowed eyes.

"Does he think he is going to solve the problem of the mines by poking around down there? The problem goes much deeper than that. It has *layers* this problem, like an old summer garden. You pile on the mulch, and you pile it on and pile it on and one day, *if you're lucky*, you get a nice bed of roses.

"Does this *friend* of yours think he is going to get to the root of the rosebush just by taking one *look* at something he has no idea of how to *see*?" Her voice deepened, bubbling up from the deep well of her chest full of the chill of buried caverns.

"He's just like the rest of them, and so are you." She pointed her finger at Missing. "You think this city runs itself on cobbled streets and dreams? They think, oh here we've got a nice port, we'll just ship some things in, let people pay a little tax to sell them here, make plenty of money. Can an entire city be paid from the paltry taxes on a few rugs and shoes? *No.*" She brought her fist down on the table, and it quivered.

"*They* don't remember what built it up. They don't remember how this used to be an enormous field full of sheep. They don't remember what's *under* it, what came out of the ground here that they've built this city on *top* of. They don't *think*, for one moment, what had to go *out* of Manking, in order to bring the rugs and shoes *in*. What was it? The salt, that's what. If it hadn't been for the salt, Manking would still just be a field. Oh yes, you can pull a city up out of the mud and filth, but a city doesn't stand on its own. It was barely *limping* when my predecessors came here. *They* found the salt, and *they* mined it, and *they* built Manking up."

A limp tendril of Esmariah's hair had come loose and was flapping against her chin as she strode around, gesturing.

"And if my family paid the greatest price it was only because the others were too cowardly to take a chance on what was offered to them. Too afraid to give up their gold. But we weren't.

Gold meant *nothing* compared to what would come out of those caverns. Our mine was the most important, the most lucrative of them all, for generations. Just because it's failing doesn't mean we made a bad decision. Doesn't mean we meant to harm this city we built. Doesn't mean I will abandon it now."

"And." She turned. "It doesn't mean that your young friend can take one look down there and understand the complexities of what is going on."

Missing stood perfectly still, stunned. Esmariah glared at her, then went to sit back down in her chair. She picked up the knife, and finished off Byron Burger's poems, cutting deep scars in the book's leather.

"Doesn't seem too complex," Utter Riley said. Esmariah's shoulders stiffened, but she did not stop her work.

"Mine's failing. Bray knows why. You keep giving him your gold, and he keeps taking it, and nobody's gotten salt from the Gasp mine in a year."

Utter glared at his employer's back, waiting for some reply. There was none.

"Doesn't seem too complex to me at all," he muttered, then turned and climbed back up on the ladder.

Missing, unable to control herself, fled. No one called her back.

Chapter 7

Damned salt and bugger the mines and ought to just move away all together and put a braid in my hair and I don't need this and she didn't have to yell when I'm just trying to help and I'll probably be put out and then Aunt Orangia will yell and I really will go stand at Marbelous and Weyne then for my money and show them all and serve them RIGHT…

The stack of pots in the kitchen were coming along nicely. Missing had been scrubbing them for an hour, picking furiously at the dried food with her fingernails until they were shattered and raw.

"All right," said Utter quietly, from behind her. "All right then. There's no need for all this fuss."

He put a pot on to boil and handed her a paring knife, gesturing toward the potatoes. Missing went at them furiously for a moment, until a near-miss with the knife came close to severing her thumb. Then she took a deep breath and slowed down.

"Thirty years I worked here and never heard that woman ask for help, not once," the old man said. "She ain't about to start now, and she don't like people pointing it out to her. That's all it was."

Missing mumbled something intended to be acquiescent.

"That boy," Utter said. "Roger. He been down in the mines again?"

"Yes. And he saw Cadaberous Bray down there looking for something."

Utter grunted.

"Do *you* know what he's looking for?" Missing turned.

"No," the man said. "I don't. Been here all this time and I never could figure it out. 'Course, in the beginning, I wasn't much interested. Tell you what I do know. When Esmariah says the gold's all gone to the mines she means that's exactly where it went."

Missing stopped. "You mean she's using it to pay people to work the mines?"

"I mean we loads it up in barrows and take it to Bray and he puts it down *there*, somewhere."

The knife dangled in Missing's hand. "*What*? Why?"

"Dunno." Utter shrugged. "I just know that before, he'd take the gold, put it down there, and next day there'd be salt. Then a year ago he comes and says it's not working as well any more. And ever since then there's been a little less salt, and a little less gold."

"That doesn't make any sense." Missing went back to the potatoes. "You can't just put gold in a mine and have it turn into salt. It doesn't do that, does it?"

"Not unless there's something down there that *changes* things somehow," Utter said. He dug into the pocket of his pants and pulled out a piece of paper.

"This friend of yours. He might be interested in this. I pulled it outta one of her books a while back when I first started getting curious. Can't make heads or tails of it myself."

He handed her the paper. It was aged and spotty, and the wax seal had long since chipped away, leaving only an oily mark. She opened it carefully and looked at the script.

In Regards to the Matter of the Mines, 1312

Dear Alister:

I am writing to advise you as to the current situation in the mine. The fifty years of projected activity are nearly at an end. As your family is new to its care taking, I feel it wise to suggest that you begin preparations this year for the inevitable year of inactivity, anticipated to occur on or near this date, 1313. This should not

disrupt your activities unduly, and can be well planned for in advance. As long as the gold is rationed as per our specifications, I do not see that this will inconvenience us at all, and you will be able to take up mining again in 1314.

Regards,
Lusid Bray, solicitor

Missing stared at the letter. It *was* important–she could feel that–but she could not put her finger on why.

"Alister was her grandfather," Utter said. "And Lusid was *his* grandfather. Been working for the family since the beginning."

Missing looked up into his face, searching for–well, she had no idea what she was searching for. His eyes were clear and vaguely blue.

"I'll give it to him," she said.

"I'm to deliver this load of gold to Bray tomorrow afternoon. You might warn that Roger to be careful. There's things going on that ain't what they seem."

She nodded.

"Now come and help me trim the hedges."

That was all they spoke of it.

* * *

When Missing left later that afternoon, Utter climbed back up the stairs and knocked on a door–one of the last in the hallway. He was called in to Esmariah's parlor. It was severely feminine, being mostly fuchsia, but without any lace or tassels or cheap knick-knacks to clutter it up. There were books here, the few saved from the shaving, and several small portraits with their frames intact. The dog leapt up to greet him, shivering and whining.

"Did she take the letter?" the Lady Gasp asked. She was bent over a table, eyeing her genealogy.

Utter grunted.

"I cannot be found to have any involvement in this, Utter. If it was discovered I had a hand in anything that is threatening this city my shipping rights would be revoked, at the very least. Are you certain you believe she will be able to help? She doesn't strike me as a very clever girl."

"I think," said Utter slowly, "I think maybe she's getting there." He went to stand next to the window and look down at the drive. He saw Missing greeted by a young man who had slipped inside the gate to stand in the middle of the raked drive. Utter scowled.

"Anyway, her heart's in the right place, mostly," he said, then turned and left.

Esmariah pulled a letter out of her pocket that she had received the day before from her employee in Western Pressing. She picked up a quill and scratched out the portion of the Sealyham line that said *heir unknown?* Then, in a neat and careful script, she added a name.

She got up and moved to a divan. The dog leapt up beside her and immediately curled itself up into a small ball of mostly lint. Esmariah Gasp picked up a book from a small side-table, but she did not open it. Instead she ran her fingers over and over its gold-leaf for a very long time. It was "An Illustrated Book of Legendary Creatures for the Young Reader." Her grandfather had given it to her when she was five and had said, "Tell me about the salts, Opa, in the caves."

* * *

Missing had forgotten about Titus. Strange the way he slipped her mind after all she had gone through that morning to make herself more firmly rooted in his.

"Hello," he said. "I'm here like I promised."

"Yes," she said. Then suddenly found she didn't really have anything else to say. He opened the gate for her and they began to walk toward Penham-Wynek.

"You've changed your hair."

Her hand flew up to her head self-consciously. "Yes. Thank you," she stammered, though he had not really given her much of a compliment.

"What did you do today?"

"Hedges," she said.

"No more gold?"

"Oh yes. Esmariah took care of that. She stripped the titles off her books."

He frowned. "There can't be a lot of gold then."

"It's all she has left, I'm afraid." She turned to him. "Titus, does your Gran *want* to buy the Sealyham mine?"

He looked startled. "I suppose she does. Ours got badly flooded last year, and it never really recovered."

"Then why doesn't she just offer to split the costs with Esmariah? Surely you know the Sealyhams won't sell to your family."

"Won't they?" He squinted up at the sky for a moment.

"No. And your grandmother wants Esmariah to go into the bargain so she can use the Gasp name. That's why she keeps trying to cheat her out of the profits."

"Oh, that's just bargaining." He waved his hand. "Eventually they'll come to an agreement."

"Yes, but will it be too late?"

"Why do you want to talk about all this?" he said. "It isn't very pleasant."

"No, but some things aren't, are they? I don't suppose–" she took a breath. "I don't suppose you could do anything about it?"

"Probably not." He shrugged. "Gran doesn't really listen to me."

"Oh."

They walked in silence for a moment.

"Do you want to hear something funny?" he said. "There's going to be a rally tonight."

"What's funny about that?"

"Oh, it's just for women. That Black Lotus is putting it on. It's all about laws and things. I shouldn't imagine most women really know much about that sort of thing."

"Well, no one really tells them about it, do they?" Missing said. "It's not as if they can go to University to find out."

"Why would they want to?" Titus replied. "That's what a husband's for."

Missing thought about it. "But what about the women who don't get married? Or don't want to? Shouldn't they be allowed to do things for themselves?"

Titus laughed. "What things? It's not as if they can be smiths and brewers."

Missing thought briefly of Bertie, the large woman who lived on the end of her street and was indeed a brewer. She often complained to Aunt Orangia about having to put the business in her worthless brother's name to be accepted into the guild. Her brother did nothing but sit around all day, claiming a delicate composition unsuited to most jobs. Bertie claimed his composition was merely unsuited to the desire to provide for himself.

"I suppose."

"Anyway, I'll probably go, just to see," he said. "What about you?"

"I would." She stuck her hand in her pocket where the letter was. "But I've got to talk to someone about something."

"What is it?"

"Nothing important."

Titus stopped and looked at her, smiling. "Is it that boy, the baker? I could step aside, you know. I mean, I'd hate to be in the way–"

"No!" she said, too quickly. "No. Roger and I are just friends."

"Oh, I know that," he laughed. "I was only teasing. Fancy being courted by a lost cause like that."

Two things occurred to her. He had mentioned courting. And he had called Roger a lost cause. Missing did not know quite what to think at that point. She felt the need to clarify things, but didn't know how to go about it. *Do you mean we're courting, and you don't want Roger in the way*, she wanted to ask, but didn't think that was really the way people went about clarifying these types of situations. As far as this situation went, she was completely lost, and somehow she didn't think her aunt could clear it up for her. But perhaps there was someone who could.

"Well, it's a long walk back for you," she said. "And I've got to go pick up my aunt's remedy."

"Yes, good-bye," he said without protest, wandering off down a side street.

Missing watched him go for a moment, then hurried into the Shunts.

Ivy's bakery was warm and familiar and smelled of yeast and buttermilk and other comforting things. Roger was sweeping up near the ovens and smiled when she came in.

"Roger, I've got something you might be interested in," she said. "Where's Ivy?" She handed him the letter Utter had given her.

"In the back," he said. "What is it?"

"I don't know, but I think it's important. Let me know when you figure it out." She hurried toward the back and found Ivy carefully chopping up dried things and storing them in neatly labeled pots. Some of the things she was chopping appeared to have legs.

"Hello Miss. That's a fetching blouse." The woman looked up with a smile.

"My aunt says it makes me look like a Marbelous whore," Missing said.

Ivy laughed. "Your aunt means well, in her own way."

"How do you know when someone is courting you?" Missing blurted out.

Ivy raised one eyebrow and motioned to a chair. Missing sat down, twisting her hands in her lap.

"Well, there are all sorts of ways to go about it," the baker said. "Most start off with talking."

Missing nodded. "Right. And then?"

"Eventually the talking leads to more talking, and sometimes to other things. Why? Are you being courted?"

"That's the problem. I don't know."

"Do you like him?"

Missing nodded.

"And does he go out of his way to spend time with you?"

She nodded again.

"Then I would say you're definitely walking down the right road. And, if I may say so, he's a young man with real prospects, so you could do worse."

Missing stared. "Who?"

"Roger." Ivy winked.

"I wasn't talking about Roger." She grimaced. "I was talking about Titus."

"Ah." Ivy sat back. "So you could do worse."

"What do you mean?" Missing asked. But just then Roger burst through the doorway.

"This is fantastic!" He waved the letter. "It says there's a pattern to all this. Fifty years of mining, then a year off. By the date on the letter there's supposed to be a year of inactivity starting right about now, only Esmariah's been having problems for a year prior to this one. That means the schedule's off."

He looked at the two women, who were looking at one another in strained silence.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Nothing Roger," they replied in unison.

"If only I could get down there before the tide comes in." He frowned. "I'd like to see if the water in the cove rises to the same level as the tide."

"There's something else," Missing said, shaking off Ivy's comment. "Utter Riley told me Esmariah puts her gold in the mine itself. Bray's going to take another load down tomorrow night."

"*In* the mine?" Ivy sat up. "That's ridiculous. Why, it's the oldest wive's tale–" She rose from the table, jostling her herbs.

"What is it?" Roger said.

She looked at him as if she had forgotten he was there. "Something I'll have to check into." Then she bustled out quickly.

"I suppose I'd better get home," Missing said. "Coming for dinner?"

Roger nodded and followed her out.

Once out of the Shunts they found the streets peculiarly busy. Small groups of women were on the move, striding purposefully toward the square.

"The rally," Missing said. "I forgot."

"Rally? That sounds exciting. Let's go and see."

"I'm not really in the mood Roger."

"Oh come on. How often does one get to see a good rally?" He grabbed her by the arm and propelled her forward. "What's it about?"

"Women's rights or something." Missing sighed.

"That doesn't seem so bad. My mother always says women have rights."

"I don't know. I just don't know if Aunt Orangia would approve."

"Well, there she is. You can ask her."

Aunt Orangia was standing on the fringe of a small crowd of about one hundred women, surrounding a wooden platform that had been set up in the center of the market square. Most of the women were trying to look as if they had just *happened* to be there at that moment. They were meandering around in groups murmuring attempts at naivety like, "oh my, what's this Celia? Just happened to be on my way home, you know." There was another, smaller crowd of curious men loitering around, grinning and calling out. Most of the women ignored them. Aunt Orangia spied them approaching.

"Ridiculous," she said. "All this fuss. And someone has pinned something on me." She indicated a small black ribbon on her sleeve.

"There she is," someone hissed. All eyes turned to the platform.

The Black Lotus stepped up, cloaked and masked. Her Ladies were behind her, looking similarly fierce in pastel shades of rose and yellow. Someone snickered. The Black Lotus ignored it. She seemed much smaller than Missing remembered.

"Women of Manking!" she shouted. "I am the Black Lotus of Revolutionary Ideas!" She paused dramatically.

A small group of younger girls to one side clapped a little. Missing looked around and felt that the Black Lotus had her work cut out for her. She wasn't really sure these women had come to join in the cause. She was more certain they were waiting for an apology for all the vandalism.

"I call out to you, my sisters!" the Black Lotus said, undaunted.

"I'm old enough to be her grandmother, and if I were I'd paddle her behind for all that glue," an old woman muttered.

"I call out to you to throw off the oppressive shackles of this patriarchal prison that we call Manking!"

"Who's going to prison?" a worried woman asked. "Are we going to prison?" She was shushed by the group of younger girls to the front.

"For generations the laws of Manking have been designed to ignore the needs of women. What woman among you has not felt the sting of this gender-biased oppression?"

The women looked around, wondering who had been stung.

"Just what kind of oppression are we talking about here?" Bertie the brewer stepped forward. A small, respectful space formed around her burly arms and grim face.

The Black Lotus had come well prepared. "Women not allowed to own businesses, for one thing."

"Ah," Bertie nodded. "*That* oppression. That's a bad one. But I just send my brother to the guild meetings, you know. He's worthless for anything else. Makes those old guild prudes feel better, I think, to see a man talking 'stead of a woman. But they all know where the orders come from."

There were some chuckles. The Black Lotus narrowed her blue eyes.

"Women left penniless while their husbands run off to Marbelous whores," she announced.

"Oh, that's all right," someone said. "Keeps 'em out from underfoot. And if you ask nicely, the girls send 'em back."

The Black Lotus was quickly losing stride. "Um. Not being able to make laws?"

"Make laws?" a man called out. "Got a king for that, you know."

"Listen." The girl raised her hands to quiet the sudden hubbub. "It's *important*. Don't you see? We ought not to have to follow their rules, and marry whatever soppy boy *they* say to, even if it's good for the family."

The machine of Missing's mind–so far only used for storage–took this bit of rhetoric, fed it into a cranial slot, and went *click*.

"It isn't fair. It's oppression, I tell you! And you'd all better open your eyes because one day it'll be *you* they come to and say 'he's not so bad, and the pimples will go away, and you'll probably learn to like one another anyway' and–"

Missing felt that it was that moment when the Black Lotus lost her audience. Her voice had changed slightly, growing a bit higher, and the tempo increased. The people of Manking were devoted audiences who liked a good show. Unfortunately, they were also a fairly knowledgeable critique group. They knew what made a good speech, and the moment the Black Lotus wavered they were ready and willing to offer commentary. This time commentary came in the form of a tomato, lobbed from an uncertain position. It soared majestically up over their heads and descended in an almost perfect geometric arch. Breaths drew in.

The tomato hit Iron Dandelion square in the chest. She stumbled back with a gasp, looking suddenly like a lemon that had been savaged. There was an exhalation of breath and silence. The

girl's chin quivered a bit. The crowd waited. It quivered more, palsied with her effort not to cry. Then she gave up and burst into tears. Poisonous Rose patted her shoulder with an obligatory attentiveness, trying to avoid getting any pulp on her gloves.

For some reason the tomato did not have the desired effect of eliciting derision and an all-around row. Instead the crowd of women bristled, and one hundred sets of shoulders tensed. One hundred pairs of eyes turned to focus on the men who had gathered nearby. Several of them, the smarter ones, immediately threw up their hands to show them free of vegetation.

"Here now," shouted a woman. "You got no call to do that to the poor girl! And she all dressed up to come talk to us."

Heads nodded in perfect unison. Feet shuffled. The crowd, like a living insect, moved forward. The men shrank back.

"*That's* oppression," someone snarled. "Throwing tomatoes at a little slip of a girl like that! Shame on you!"

"*Shame on you*," the crowd echoed, filling up the square with the power of their voices. This power–born into them–rocketed through their maternal sinews and erupted. Every man who had ever had a mother cringed at those words. Several of them, fully grown men with businesses and families of their own, scuffed their toes on the cobbles guiltily.

"That's right!" the Black Lotus crowed. "Rights for women! Fight oppression!"

"Rights for women!" The crowd of younger girls raised their fists and shook them, purpose shining in their eyes for the first time. "Rights for women!"

"Soldiers!" someone said.

The crowd began to disperse quickly, suddenly united in their right not to be arrested. But there were glares for the men, and murmurs of "rights for women" moved along like a slow wave far out to sea that had not yet encountered the shore. The Black Lotus and her Ladies jumped down from the platform and were surrounded by a safe cocoon of their young fans, who began to hustle them away. As they went, the Black Lotus glanced back. Her mask, ornamental at best, slipped to one side and Missing saw her features clearly. Blue eyes, milky skin, enviable rose-tinted lips.

Realization raced through formerly sluggish synapses, newly called into action.

What're my points? You're supposed to be keeping score!

None of them know how to read anyway.

Click. Click.

It was Prudity Grumm.

"Orangia?" a familiar voice said. They turned to find Inquisitor Croomb standing there. "We heard there was some rabble here. You're not involved, are you?"

"Certainly not," she replied, her hand darting up to pluck the black ribbon from her sleeve.

"That's good." He mopped at his round cheeks with a handkerchief. "Lucky I ran into you, actually. I've just been to see the queen. Shall I pop in for dinner and tell you about it?"

"Of course." Missing's aunt nodded and led the way through the crowd.

As rallies went it had not been really spectacular. But as Missing glanced back she saw that it *had* done something. The crowd of women dispersed, but they dispersed in clumps and groups and were talking amongst themselves, with gestures. Some of the gestures were not very flattering, and many of them were aimed in the direction of the men.

"It's good news really," Croomb said. He had to puff a bit to keep stride with them. "My friend was right about the queen. She's very interested. She's organizing a formal inquisition of the mines, and I'm to be in charge of it. We'll begin investigating by next week."

"Uh oh." Roger leaned against a nearby wall. Missing did the same, recognizing the signal.

Orangia and Croomb were flung headlong to the cobbles. Luckily, her aunt landed on Croomb, so Missing didn't have to be concerned for her safety. Even leaning against the wall did not help with the tremor that brought her to her knees. They stayed that way for a while, until the tremor passed. Then Roger's hand found her elbow and helped her up. He was stronger than she had realized, and lifted her to her feet with ease.

"Oh *dammit*, Orangia, are you–"

"Yes, I'm quite fine–"

"Of course, just let me–"

"Your hand, Morwin, if you don't mind. It's on my–"

"Ah, ha. Yes. All straightened out now?"

The two adults were blushing and doing their best not to admit it as they helped each other up.

Somewhere, across the city, a long roar and short *clumph* told them something else had fallen down.

"Oh dear." Croomb frowned. "That was probably the Interior of Ministry. We evacuated it yesterday because it was leaning so badly."

Roger looked at him. "Next week will be too late," he said.

"It's the best I could do," Croomb said.

"But it may not be the best we can do."

"What do you mean by that?" The Inquisitor squinted at him.

"He means, Morwin, that the investigation has already begun. In the mines, if I'm not mistaken," Aunt Orangia said. "Roger and Missing were in the Gasp mine last night. Up to who-knows-what and under some misguided impression that they could take care of all this on their own."

Roger and Missing both turned to stare. Aunt Orangia raised one eyebrow.

"You were gone the first time I checked on you. Then suddenly back again. I nearly had a heart-attack waiting those two hours. Try to imagine me, wondering where you were, imagining all sorts of terrible things–"

Missing shivered with guilt. Aunt Orangia had a way of making it seem that not only had she been irresponsible, but terribly impolite as well.

Her aunt turned to Croomb. "They had help. My guess would be Ivy the baker."

Roger groaned. Missing stared at her aunt in horrified surprise. Surely she wasn't–she couldn't be–but would she really turn them all in?

"Ah." Mister Croomb's face fell. "I–I know how hard it must be for you Orangia, to inform on one of your own. But you can be sure that while the matter is pursued, I will do my best to make certain Missing has adequate counsel, and Manking thanks you for your attention to your civic duty–"

"You can take my civic duty and shove it up your assigned duty roster," Aunt Orangia said. Missing suddenly choked on an invisible bit of dirt. Roger had to thump her on the back several times.

"I did not tell you this so that you would put them in prison. And if you do, Morwin Croomb, I will deny ever having said it and never speak to you again for as long as you live."

Croomb opened his mouth, then shut it again.

"I told you this," the woman went on, "so that you would help. And you will, won't you?"

If she had been Ivy, she might have batted her eyelashes or shrugged a fetchingly revealed shoulder. But Orangia was above that sort of display, and probably wouldn't have approved of it. As

she watched her aunt Missing was hit with the suspicion that the woman might have actually *evolved* beyond it all. There was something complicated–and undeniably knowing–in the look Orangia gave the rotund Inquisitor. Mister Croomb was staring at her as if hooked on the horns of a decision he had had no say in whatsoever, and did not find the seating quite to his liking.

"I suppose it wouldn't hurt to discuss it," he said.

To be continued in the June 2003 issue of Deep Magic...

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